

Congress of Older People's Voices from the Margins

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Ageing on a Farm, by Maddie

My mother June is 96 and was a farmer; she still lives on a farm, 260 kms from the nearest city. The closest town has a declining population of 2000 and is 31 kms away, half of which is gravel road.

June is sturdy woman. She has lived through the Depression, a World War, and financial poverty; but she has been happy. She is of a stoic generation. That's partly how she coped on her own. All those difficult experiences made her strong. She grew up watching people cope on their own.

June loves living on the farm. She sits on the front veranda and surveys the hills with the two-way radio going to hear what's happening on nearby farms. She knows who is opening or closing what gate. In summer she listens to fire radio, hosted by the local volunteer fire brigade.

When June had to hand over her driver's license, she really felt that loss of her independence. She still laments that she can't just drive into town and get what she wants. It was a massive change in her life. If we weren't all so busy, we could take mum to more things. But I'm flat-out putting food into her freezer and cleaning her house.

The loss of her driver's license meant loss of access, freedom and self-determination. I know mum is not going to call in to see people, but she likes to feel she would be able to. The fact that she can't increases her sense of isolation.

June has also had to hand over her gun license. She has always been a hunter and had a gun from when she was a child. She used to shoot rabbits from the front veranda and go off hunting with her dog. It was all part of her sense of space, wandering off into the bush. The loss of her gun meant loss of her sense of space and freedom.

June is interested in the chooks and magpies and gardening but has to be very careful gardening now. She has been a very physical person. Sport was her key thing from schooldays, tennis and golf as an adult and working on the farm. She later moved to croquet, but she can't get into town to play that, and it's more difficult now that her balance is becoming unreliable.

The family is happy to support June to live at home as long as she possibly can; but she needs home support. A few years ago, we filled out paperwork for home care, but June refused to sign it; she thought it was a first step to an aged care home, so I gave up.

We cook her meals and have a cleaner who does some of the most basic cleaning. My brother and his wife live in a separate house on the farm, and they visit every day, but she still feels lonely. The biggest issue for her is loneliness.

Mum is also not very sociable, she quite likes her company, but she gets lonely. I remind her to call her sisters and friends, but she won't do it. It doesn't help that she doesn't hear very well. I bought her a hearing aid, but she refuses to wear it and she doesn't hear the phone unless she's close to it. I think people ring, but she doesn't hear the phone.

She's an interesting product of life of self-reliance. She also won't wear a fall alarm, despite paying for it for years.

I spoke to a home and community care service, but they don't have much to offer if you don't need food or a cleaner. It would be great if they could coordinate transport, I would love to see a local minibus pick up older people and drive around. They could look at other farms who see who has sheep and what the crops are doing.

To get to a podiatrist, optometrist, cardiologist or audiologist is a two-hour trip each way; but now we have a visiting podiatrist in town once a fortnight. If we drive into town there is also a dentist who visits weekly and a physiotherapist. My cousin lives on next door farm, he will take mum in for dental or podiatry appointments and do a bit of shopping, at least once a month.

Telehealth works well and most of mum's medication script refills are provided over the phone. If the phone service signal was reliable, we could set her up with Skype to connect with people. She would love to see more of her grandchildren.

Mum is getting more forgetful. She has more difficulty managing her medications, keeping the house going, changing light bulbs, or fixing things that break. When my brother and his wife go away, we have to have another family move in to support her. There is a whole family infrastructure supporting her to keep living on the farm.

But older people are well respected in this farming community. There is respect for the knowledge they have and it's a close-knit community. People from Mum's era were very community minded. There was a strong sense of 'we have to do it as there's no one else to do it.' So, we have a voluntary fire brigade, Red Cross etc. There is also a lot of respect in our family.

More widely I think we're an ageist society. I recently took mum to see a doctor for a urinary tract infection. He was quite a senior doctor who said to me: old women's bladders are like old women's faces, full of wrinkles and the bacteria get trapped in the bladder. It was so insulting; she was already feeling low, luckily, she didn't hear it.

If I was to change one thing, I would say we need more social support, some kind of visitor's scheme to tackle the dreadful issue of loneliness of ageing on a farm. The visitors could help to alert family when things are not right. It would be lovely if they could visit in person. Mum is craving a scrabble buddy. Winter is very tough; she can't get out unless it's a sunny day or summer it's often too hot to be outside. A regular visitor would be ideal, she would look forward to someone coming, it would provide a little lift and a motivation to do things, to keep moving.