

USA TODAY

NO. 1 IN THE USA

Tuesday, March 7, 2006



By Mark W. Williams for USA TODAY

Holding their own: Judy Rhodes, left, founder of the Texas Women's Shooting Sports club, and club president Pearl Sivey at Elm Fork Shooting Park in Dallas.

Stereotypes get shot down

Cultural pioneers challenge conventions

By Edward Iwata
USA TODAY

When Judy Rhodes waltzed into an elk-hunting camp in the Arizona wilds recently, the men looked at her funny. She wore full makeup and gold-and-silver jewelry, and her hunter's outfit was monogrammed.

Within days, the 55-year-old Texas native had bagged a huge bull elk, a dream trophy.

"The good ol' boys didn't think a girl could hold her own," Rhodes says.

They didn't know she was a crack shot and founder of the Texas Women's Shooting Sports club, known as the Texas Divas, a nationwide group that boasts 800 members, from homemakers to executives.

Rhodes is a cultural pioneer, part of a

growing wave of Americans who are breaking boundaries and forging unique identities and lifestyles.

Busting stereotype and reinventing one's self has a long tradition in the USA. But social scientists and trend watchers say the change is spreading and accelerating, speeding the country toward what could be called "cultural fusion." Today's culture benders are making it increasingly difficult to label people by age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation or disability.

Among contributing factors:

► Global trends, including immigration and the worldwide economy, are rocking the USA.

► Baby boomers are turning 60 this year

Cover story

Going against the flow, 8D

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Fusion across the spectrum more common

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and shunning old stereotypes of retirement.

► New media and technology are transmitting instant information and different cultures and lifestyles into millions of homes.

"We're very much in an evolutionary stage as people now," says John Naisbitt, futurist and author of the *Megatrends* best sellers. "The globalization of our society is just amazing. It absolutely will lead to greater acceptance of others where the differences among us are less and less important."

Adds Ken Dychtwald, head of the Age Wave business consulting firm in San Francisco and author of *The Power Years: A User's Guide to the Rest of Your Life*: "The old rules no longer apply. People want the freedom to live their lives and dream their dreams."

Some pioneers:

► David Bianco, 66, co-founder of Elderhostel, a non-profit group that plans travel and educational programs for the elderly, baby boomers and their children. "We're appealing to a whole new generation that doesn't believe in that chronological age thing," he says.

Bianco and Marty Knowlton started Elderhostel in 1975. Today, 200,000 people a year participate in programs, from kayaking adventures to European cultural tours with leading scholars.

► Brooke Ellison, 27, a Harvard graduate who is running for a seat in November in the New York state senate as a Democrat. Ellison, a quadriplegic who was paralyzed at 11 after a car hit her, wants to show people they can leap past barriers in life and politics.

"After people have gotten to know me, my physical situation becomes invisible," she says. "I don't want people to view me as anything other than a human being."

► Peggy Gillespie, co-director of Family Diversity Projects, a non-profit group in Amherst, Mass., that offers touring photography exhibits on interracial, gay and other non-traditional families.

Gillespie is white and bisexual; she started her non-profit after she and her former husband adopted a multiracial baby. When their girl, Julianna, was 4, she was upset when a playmate said her favorite doll had "ugly brown skin." She never took the doll to preschool again.

"Even at the age of 4, she had absorbed



Napoleon Martinez Photography

You go, girl: Molly Shattuck is 39, a mother of three and a cheerleader for the Baltimore Ravens.

that message," says Gillespie, whose daughter attends Smith College. "Now she doesn't like labels, and she talks about being part of the human race."

► Asra Nomani, a former *Wall Street Journal* reporter who is fighting centuries of Islamic fundamentalist practices. In a "gender jihad," she and other Muslim reformists are hoping to change everything from mandatory wearing of veils to walled-off segregated sections for women in mosques.

Nomani, who was born in Bombay and lives in Morgantown, W. Va., launched the Muslim Women's Freedom Tour last spring, visiting mosques in the USA and urging Muslim women to push for change. Since then, Muslim groups in the USA have issued guidelines for mosques to create sections in main prayer halls for women, among other changes.

"A powerful revolution is happening,"

says Nomani, whose son, Shibli, 3, was born out of wedlock — a crime punishable by death by stoning in some Islamic regions.

Given the social progress made since the 1950s, some speculate that the nation might see a cross-cultural golden age in the coming generations. "It will require a huge shift in consciousness," Gillespie says, "but I can imagine a better, more tolerant culture."

The age factor

The age differences among American adults are becoming less discernible as boomers and the elderly shuck old ideas of what it means to be middle-aged or retired. They're stronger, healthier and more active than any generation in history.

Take 78-year-old Hershel McGriff. The fabled NASCAR driver crushed any stereotypes of the elderly by competing well into his 70s, roaring down speedways at 190 mph.

His first race was in 1945, when as a teen he borrowed his father's Hudson sedan for a dirt-track race in Portland, Ore. Before retiring from racing four years ago, he started in 236 races and won 35.

Now he works out at a gym, manages a copper mine for the Park Corp. in Arizona and takes motorcycle rides with wife Sheri and their children.

McGriff, who will be named to the Motor Sports Hall of Fame this summer, is planning one last race when he turns 80. "I miss it, and I feel I could still be competitive, but it's an expensive sport," he says, chuckling. "When I retire, I'll take up golf."

Following in his wake are millions of seniors and boomers who have no intention of doddering into senility. Already, one-quarter of people 65 to 74 years old are working — up from 15% in 1985, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The average life expectancy of boomers is 77, and many will continue to work full time and part time or dive into volunteer work and active hobbies.

In recent surveys by Age Wave for financial firms Merrill Lynch and HSBC, 42% of baby boomers say they plan to cycle

between work and leisure activities. And 56% want to tackle a new career during retirement years, says Maddy Kent Dychtwald of Age Wave and author of *Cycles: How We Will Live, Work and Buy*.

"The boomer generation is reinventing the second half of life."

Immigrants and minorities

Earlier generations of immigrants followed the often-rigid traditions of their ancestral homelands. But today, their college-educated and middle-class children and grandchildren are busting loose and shaping a whole new cultural order. About 20% to 50% of second-generation Latinos and Asians work in professional and managerial jobs, nearly double the rate of the first generation, say sociologists Richard Alba at State University of New York and Reynolds Farley of the University of Michigan.

Minorities also are wedding more whites; interracial couples make up 5.4% of U.S. marriages. And with minorities expected to rise to 50% of the population by 2050, interracial marriage rates are sure to continue growing. By 2050, about 18% of all Americans will claim mixed racial ancestry in the Census, compared with 2% in 2000, say social scientists Barry Edmonston of Portland State University and Jeffrey Passel of the Urban Institute think tank.

"Once upon a time, there was a clear set of choices that people made," says Tamar Jacoby, senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute and author of *Reinventing the Melting Pot*. "Now there are so many choices of how to think, how to define ourselves."

Says Victor Nee, a Cornell sociologist and co-author of *Remaking the American Mainstream*, "Barriers to mobility have been lowered. There's a new acceptance and openness toward multiple identities."

The gender factor

Molly Shattuck, a mother, former businesswoman and philanthropist has raised millions for charities. At 39, she's a cheerleader for the National Football League's Baltimore Ravens.

Shattuck was a college cheerleader and marketing student at Indiana University of Pennsylvania who later became director of a Sylvan Learning Systems center. She left the business world in the 1990s to raise her two boys and a girl, now ages 3 to 7.

Last year, Shattuck decided to chase a longtime dream: She tried out for a spot as an NFL cheerleader. She survived five cuts and made the Ravens squad, in which the average age is 22. "I didn't focus on my age, or what could stop me," Shattuck says. "I

just thought about the possibilities."

Despite longstanding media and political myths, millions of American women today can't be stereotyped by age, race, religion, marital status or other labels, say Republican pollster Kellyanne Conway and Democratic political strategist Celinda Lake.

In national polls since 9/11, Conway and Lake found that women were defying categories and blending their lifestyles, business practices and politics more than ever. "As much as Wall Street and Madison Avenue and Capitol Hill try to pigeonhole women into categories, women are erasing those artificial boundaries," says Conway, co-author with Lake of *What Women Really Want*.

Meanwhile, gay and transgender cultures are jarring open doors to society's mainstream. Nearly half of Americans support gay civil unions, a Gallup poll found last year. In politics, 352 gays and lesbians serve as elected officials; thousands more have been appointed to office, says the Gay & Lesbian Victory Fund and Leadership Institute, a political action and training group.

Diversity as strength

Futurist Naisbitt, a Utah farm boy who now lives in Vienna, says critics often accuse the USA of "Americanizing" other nations. But the opposite is occurring, he says: Global cultures and immigrants are shaping this country.

In the past, say Nee and Ken Dychtwald, the USA and other countries with mixed ethnic groups often were sneered at as nations of "mongrels." But now, U.S. ethnic and racial diversity is beginning to be seen as a sign of cultural and economic strength.

It's still a long way from nirvana. Much cultural progress has been made in recent years, but many obstacles remain.

Decades-old stereotypes and discrimination persist. Millions of immigrants, minorities and elderly remain mired in poverty. And many conservatives and liberals distrust the other and fear cultural change.

Still, sociologists and scholars are optimistic. They predict each passing generation increasingly will defy stereotypes and cross cultural borders to create new identities in a unique impulse of the American character that they say won't wane.

"People are making radical changes in their lives," says historian Ruth Rosen, author of *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America*. "Those opportunities are accelerating."

Adds Ken Dychtwald: "Sometimes we struggle with (diversity), but our strength has always been the energy sparked when you put diverse people together."