

SYNOPSIS

Aging in America Photographs by Ed Kashi

In American society, aging implies decay. It suggests the point at which we stop improving and we start deteriorating. We equate the addition of years with the subtraction of youth. But old age is a privilege – a concept that is lost on us. The irony, of course, is that everybody wants to live a long time, but nobody wants to grow old.

Ed Kashi and I began this project because we believe that the social impact of longevity is the single greatest challenge for the 21st century. The number of elders is growing rapidly and we're only at the beginning part of the curve. There are currently 35 million people over the age of 65 in America.

The shifting demographics have already started to alter the American landscape. We are witnessing concentrations of elders not only in Florida, but increasingly in the West and Southeast. In the meantime, rural areas are going gray fast because young people are fleeing the countryside to find work in the cities. The landscape is changing with elders inhabiting everything from private homes to nursing homes, from retirement communities to RV parks. The past decade also saw the growth of the long-term care facility and the geriatric prison ward. The situations depicted in this book are a window into the varied subcultures of aging, venturing into places where most of us don't have the time or inclination to linger, unless our advancing years or the plight of our parents forces us there.

Our work examines the commitment of family members to nurse their own, and the dedication of professionals whose careers are devoted to the care of strangers. Ed's photographs reveal how the thin veil of privacy erodes as we age and how our bodily functions become cause for public scrutiny.

There is no escaping the immediacy of these images. In every wrinkle we see our youth passing, in each diaper we suffer another humiliation, through each photograph we are forced to address our own aging process, our own mortality.

Julie Winokur