

The New York Times

The New Old Age

Caring and Coping

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The Elderly, Through the Eyes of a Geriatrician

By [PAULA SPAN](#)

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Dr. Jeffrey M. Levine was studying geriatrics at the Mt. Sinai School of Medicine in Manhattan when he began taking classes at the International Center for Photography a few blocks away.

A painter, printmaker and sculptor all through college and medical school, he'd lost the spare room he'd used as an artist's studio after moving into a small Manhattan apartment. Hence, photography.

Dr. Jeffrey M. Levine with a patient, Ethel Posnick.

Twenty-five years later, Dr. Levine's moving portraits of older Americans have appeared on 30 covers of *The Gerontologist*, among other medical journals. "Aging Through a Physician's Lens," an exhibit of his work, was shown at the New York Academy of Medicine earlier this year and traveled to universities across the South. When he travels — to Japan, Australia, Mexico, Portugal, and Peru next — he asks guides to help him meet the oldest folks in town.

"It's been a great struggle and a big financial concession," Dr. Levine said of his dual lives as a geriatrician and photographer. He was showing me slides — over-70 road racers with silver heads and taut calves, Granny Peace Brigade marchers with lined faces, the world's oldest ping-pong champion — in his small Manhattan office, which is crammed with scanners and printers and cabinets of prints. (You can see a selection of photos online at www.levinemdphotos.com.)

"I've always set aside big chunks of time for my art" — he has worked a four-day week at times — "and that's eliminated certain career paths. You need to give 110 percent of yourself in medicine to make it work."

But he had his reasons.

In part, he hopes to persuade medical students — whose documented reluctance to specialize in geriatrics may have unhappy consequences for this aging nation — that treating old people is a satisfying mission.

"You bring students to the geriatrics ward where everybody's sick, and no one will want to do it," Dr. Levine said. So while he's shot lots of pictures in hospitals and nursing homes, he also ventures out to photograph elderly musicians, rodeo riders, scholars, dancers and bikers.

He hopes to help the public, too, see older people in a different light. "Google 'pictures of aging' and you'll find I.V.'s, condescending stereotypes, caricatures," he said. "I like to show pictures that are uplifting, that show the inner spirit that helped an individual reach that age."

"I don't mean 90-year-old bungee jumpers," he added, "just people who on a daily basis live contented, happy, healthy, productive lives. Who participate in life. Who contribute to the world."

He shoots his pictures for another reason, too. When artists don't get to make art, the results aren't pretty. "I can't not do it," he said. "When I stop, my mind gets troubled."

[Paula Span](#) is the author of *When the Time Comes: Families With Aging Parents Share Their Struggles and Solutions*.

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