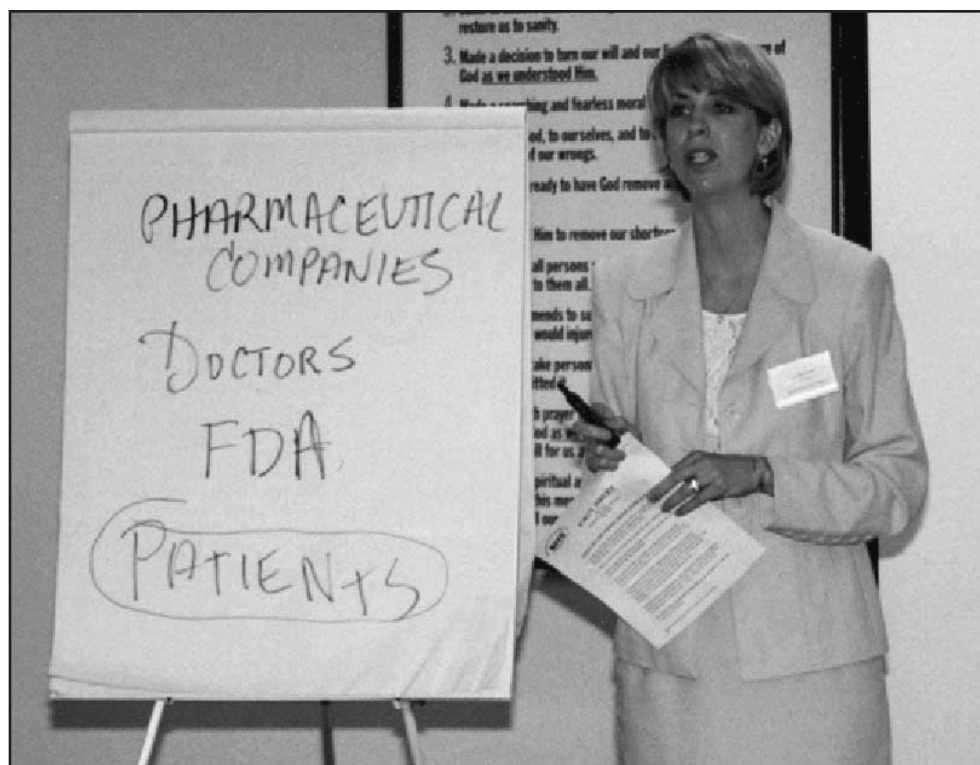


Silver Lining

Local Nonprofit Works to Change Dialogue on Senior Health, Substance Abuse



Debbie Levan, divisional director of older adult services for South Bay nonprofit Behavioral Health Services, leads a recent discussion on mental health options for older residents.

By Erik Derr

When Debbie Levan was growing up, the holiday season was a time of eager promise and celebration --- that typically eroded into feelings of anxiety and despair. "The memories of my adolescent and young adult years' holiday times are scarred with images of my family's drinking," said Levan, who vividly remembers worrying about how she, her siblings and parents would return home safely after family gatherings and then "what was ahead the next day."

Levan, who later earned first a bachelor's degree in psychobiology and then a master's degree in public health from UCLA, remembers her mother and father as "good, honest, hard-working, God-fearing people. As in many families of the generation, my mom stayed home raising four children while my dad worked outside the home as an engineer." And also like many others of their generation, they looked to alcohol after a hard day's labor. When her father returned home from work, "my parents would pour themselves their evening drinks, vodka on the rocks, to relax. It seemed very natural and common," said Levan.

But somewhere along the way, as the challenges of raising adolescents grew and her children started "leaving the nest, my mother began losing her sense of purpose in life. Her drinking became more and more a way to cope." While her mother's alcohol consumption increased, so did her use of over-the-counter medicines, as first she

drank and then tried to mask the symptoms of her abuse.

Then one night, at only age 53, Levan's mother collapsed at home and was rushed to the hospital, where she died shortly after from what doctors found was a bleeding ulcer, exacerbated by a mix of alcohol and medications. All of her mother's family, "including Dad and my siblings," Levan recalled, "were in denial about her alcohol problem. Had we only been aware, perhaps she would be living still today."

Levan's story is hauntingly familiar to that of Daniel Crawford, 43, a South Bay delivery driver who lost his parents in a car accident 10 years ago because his father --- who his family didn't know suffered from depression --- had been self-medicating himself with over-the-counter drugs. As a result, his father fell asleep behind the wheel of his car and ran into an oncoming truck. "God, it was terrible," said Crawford. "I still don't understand why he thought he could fix things himself."

When senior alcohol and drug abuse was first identified as a national problem about 35 years ago, "we were talking about those who grew up during the Depression era, many of whom joined the military right after high school, and where tradition dictated that the woman's place was in the home," said Levan. "Smoking and drinking was the rule, not the exception...problems associated with alcohol and medication misuse were a

Project Longevity Summit

RESEARCHERS AT MANHATTAN BEACH PROJECT LONGEVITY SUMMIT SEE AN END TO AGING

More than 100 attendees and participants gathered recently at the Manhattan Beach Project Longevity Summit, November 13-15, in order to find in answer to ending aging by 2029.

Hosted by the Maximum Life Foundation and sponsored by the Life Extension Foundation, the Manhattan Beach Project gathered a group of the leading scientists, entrepreneurs and visionaries for three days with the goal of developing a scientific and business strategy to make human life extension a real possibility within the next two decades.

According to Dr. Steven Joyal, Vice President of Science and Media Affairs of Life Extension Foundation, "Amazing new developments in organ transplantation science, gene therapy and nanotechnology place the likelihood of events once considered fantastic or even impossible within our grasp. That is the very real message that was conveyed at the Manhattan Beach Project Longevity Summit."

The conference opened with entrepreneur and futurist Ray Kurtzweil, who explained, "We are very close to the tipping point in human longevity. We are about 15 years away from adding more than one year of longevity per year to remaining life expectancy."

Over the next three days, experts presented their latest research at a series of conference sessions. University of California, Riverside biochemist Stephen Spindler reported on his research on calorie restriction. Spindler is

currently screening a variety of compounds, including pharmaceuticals, to see if they mimic the effects of calorie restriction in mice. He presented early results that show that some compounds to seem to increase mouse life spans. Michael Rose, a biologist at the University of California, Irvine, who's work is built on the premise that natural selection is the cause of aging, explained how using artificial selection for longevity, he has produced fruit flies that live four times longer than normal, the human equivalent of being healthy at age 300.

William Andrews, head of Sierra Sciences, talked about his company's project to identify compounds that lengthen telomeres, which have been shown to have an effect in controlling aging in cells and thus control aging in us. Biologist Michael West discussed the use of induced pluripotent stem cells (IPS cells). IPS cells can be transformed into other types of cells, which can be used to repair damage or rejuvenate tissues and organs.

By the end of the summit, one thing was very clear: researchers are finally beginning to understand the actual causes of aging, and with this increased scientific understanding, some researchers now believe they are on the way to figuring out how to stop it, and ---eventually--- how to reverse it. While there is still a long way to go, what just a few years ago seemed like science fiction to many is quickly becoming a reality.

Readers interested in learning more about the Manhattan Beach Project Longevity Summit should visit www.manhattanbeach-project.com •

natural consequence of the day."

According to a 2005 study by the American Psychological Association's Office on Aging, alcohol abuse is among the eight leading causes of senior death. Additional data collected between 2005 and 2006 by the National Survey on Drug Use and Health and published recently by the American Journal of Psychiatry showed binge drinking, defined as five or more drinks on the same occasion within the past 30 days, was reported by 14 percent of men and three percent of women age 65 or older. Higher rates were reported by those in the 50-64 age group, 23 percent of men and nine percent of women. Another report, developed during the same time by the national Substance Abuse and Mental Health Association, showed combined alcohol and medication misuse affects an estimated 19 percent of all older Americans.

"I truly believe that raising awareness of the dangers, helping people understand the risks and sharing stories of tragedy and triumph over substance abuse problems is what can make a difference --- has made a difference," said Levan, who today heads up outreach efforts throughout the South Bay that focus on the mental health needs of older residents, particularly substance abuse prevention and education.

She serves as a divisional director for Behavioral Health Services, Inc. a community-based health and social service nonprofit based out of Gardena, and oversees "The Medicine Education Program," a drug misuse prevention effort, along with "Promotores de salud," or "Health Promoters," a nationally-recognized project that provides culturally-appropriate education about health promotion and alcohol

and drug abuse prevention to senior volunteers, who then take what they've learned into the Latino community.

An appointed member of the Aging Constituent Committee of the California Department of Alcohol & Drug Programs and an active member of the American Society on Aging, Levan also manages through BHS the South Bay Senior Services, a program that reaches over 400 new seniors each month and offers care management and in-home supportive services--- including a registry of in-home caregivers, friendly visitor and telephone reassurance services---to home-bound, frail elderly and disabled adults.

Since its inception in the 1970s, Senior Services has helped over 13,000 residents in Manhattan Beach, Hermosa Beach, Redondo Beach, Torrance, Lomita and Palos Verdes, linking them to resources that allow them to live more safely in their own homes. "I really think if my parents had known about something like Behavioral Health, that comes to you into the community, things would be a lot different. We would have had more happy Christmases," said Crawford, the driver who lost both his parents in a car crash.

Of course, Lavan remembers her own mother and father at every step of her journey. She talks about them with those who will listen. "I feel that if my words, my story can impact the lives of older adults or their family members to help prevent this tragedy from happening to their loved ones," she said, "my job is worthwhile."

More information about Behavioral Health Services and its South Bay Senior Services program is available online at www.bhs-inc.org or by calling (310) 679-9126. •



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