Breaking Silence: The Story of the Sisters at DeSales Heights

Andrea Nevins, MPH, Sister Mary Thill, osf, MA

The American Association of Diabetes Educators has produced high-quality short videocassettes that speak directly to diabetics and their families. The eight-part series begins with an explanation of diabetes. Then it describes and demonstrates ways in which patients can manage their illness using good nutrition, exercise, medication, and a health care plan. The information is accurate, relevant, and is offered in bite-sized chunks suitable for patients dealing with emotional and cognitive aspects of the disease. Patient responsibility is stressed throughout the series.

Much information is presented with obvious places to stop the videos for discussion. The series would be well used in a 4- to 6-week class for new diabetics and their partners. That would allow time for life-style changes and practical questions to arise. The series would also educate and motivate longtime and noncompliant diabetics. "Preventing Long Term Complications of Diabetes" and "Diabetes Foot and Skin Care: In Step" offer especially useful information for that audience.

The videos "Understanding Insulin" and "Injecting Insulin" should be available to every new insulin patient. Too often a nurse speaks a few words of direction and encouragement, then hands the patient a needle and an orange. It would be cost-effective and educational for hospitals and physicians to use these tapes. Unfortunately, most will probably accept less helpful free materials from drug company representatives.

Technically, there is a sharp contrast in quality between earlier and later videos. "Introduction to Diabetes: the Game Plan" and "Diabetes and Exercise: in Training" have a few distracting camera movements that detract from the message. Two of the eight tapes previewed had brief whiteouts of actors. These are minor problems, however. Script quality is high with an interesting blend of informality, instruction, patient reactions, and graphics that reinforce the information.

Most patients shown are middle-aged, and the very old do not appear in the series. This was not a problem for the 74-year-old noncompliant diabetic who previewed the series before this review was written. He and his wife learned a lot from it, he said, after 14 years with diabetes and 5 years using insulin.

In summary, these tapes are too good to miss. Diabetics need this information but the cost is high. Is there a benefactor who can subsidize dissemination? I suggest that you lobby Milner-Fenwick, Inc. and the American Association of Diabetes Educators to lower the price. Pharmacies should add the series to their lending libraries of life-saving information.

Sally White, MD
The Nutrition Physician
RR 1, Box 95
North Bangor, NY 12966


Breaking Silence is a moving video of great sadness and melodrama documenting the existence of the last year (1992) of a small group of cloistered nuns in Parkersburg, West Virginia. Like aging, the video is basically about changes that occur in life as one moves toward the later years. In this case, it is a group of 10 cloistered women who ran an elementary school (the first in the city over 100 years ago) and lived a contemplative life. They simply aged in place, with the exception of the youngest member who was the elected leader (Mother Superior). As Mother Superior her major tasks would be to help the group decide to close the school and move out of the outdated convent, sell the buildings and the property, move the deceased members from one cemetery to another, and find a place for each Sister to live out her remaining days.

The Mother Superior definitely sees herself as a daughter in a role-reversal situation. She speaks of having "nine grandmothers" so this reversal actually slipped a generation because the Sisters are so much older than she. She is by religious election the "Mother" and she is also the "mother" who must now care for her "daughters" in need. (Note: The mother-daughter relationship among many religious orders today has been dropped in favor of a more mature, collegial, woman-to-woman relationship.)

Candid interviews and scenes showing the Sisters talking about the move and the impact this will have on their lives reveal similarities between the Sisters and their female counterparts who must retire from work, leave familiar surroundings after many years of being in one place, and cope with the decision of moving to another location. The strong religious belief system perhaps cushions the blow, but change is still very difficult for these women. Questions of the value of the life lived at DeSales Heights for so many years, the decision to close the convent and school, the need to find a safe and secure place to live away from a group that had become "family" are some of the issues faced by this group of aging nuns.
The saddest and most dramatic scenes were the auctioning off of the material goods (furniture, dishes, art work, etc.) and the removal of the remains of the Sisters buried in the convent crypt to a local cemetery. At this point tears flowed among a group of Sisters who viewed the video with this reviewer. Questions erupted — How will we do the convent crypt to a local cemetery. At this point tears with someone present who knows and understands the video? What does the title of the video mean? The video the purpose of the added interviews of religious women (etc.) and the removal of the remains of the Sisters buried in and men and lay women interspersed throughout the video? What does the title of the video mean? The video left many questions to answer and, for this reason, it could be used with a variety of viewing audiences.

A discussion guide accompanying the video contains sets of questions to be used with students of gerontology, sociology, women’s studies, religious studies, and anthropology. A brief introduction, historical background, and postscript (where are the Sisters now?) are also included.

Breaking Silence would be best viewed and discussed with someone present who knows and understands the concept of religious life in the Roman Catholic church. It is not just a video about aging, but one about a way of life and the profound changes that can occur when such a way of life is no longer viable in a particular setting.

Sister Mary Thill, osf, MA, Specialist in Aging Chairperson, Gerontology Department Lourdes College 6832 Convent Blvd. Sylvania, OH 43560


This video realistically portrays several retired homemakers as they struggle to live independently in an urban area. Their poverty-line precursors include divorce, widowhood, low-paying jobs with no pensions, multiple chronic illnesses, and the double jeopardy of sex and ethnic minority status.

The viewer is sensitively introduced to the severe financial hardships faced by older women whose survival depends on government spending. Supportive services shown are subsidized housing, Supplemental Security Income, in-home care, neighborhood nutrition/socialization services, and care managers. Without reform of Social Security programs, the future looks bleak for these generations of women.

When She Gets Old is timely and of high production quality. It would be an excellent introduction to programs on financial planning for women. It is also well-suited for sensitization training of ‘services to the aging’ providers, and will complement ‘Sociology of Aging’ college courses. Useful discussion questions, following a showing of this video, would be: (1) What is the stated purpose of the Social Security Act of 1935? (2) Why has the United States been slower to implement policies affecting the aging population than European countries with similar levels of socioeconomic development? (3) Do you agree/disagree that age-based programs are an efficient way to set a minimum floor of protection for beneficiaries, and are they less stigmatizing than means-tested services? (4) Give an example of a needs-based government program described in the video and critique, and (5) Name several options available to help you prepare for your own old age.

Mary A. Berdan, MSW, ACSW Adjunct Faculty St. Clair County Community College Port Huron, MI 48061-5015


Legacy: America’s Indian Elders is enormously valuable in one respect: It brings up a subject that has not even been considered by most professionals in aging services, let alone those in the general population who are simply concerned in some way about care of the elderly.

The subject is the disparity in funding of, and services provided by, Older Americans Act programs designed to serve aging Native Americans, as compared to those that serve the rest of the country’s elderly. Legacy — produced by the National Indian Coalition on Aging — does a service in bringing this shameful inequality to the attention of both lay and professional audiences.

As a consciousness-raising tool, the video effectively demonstrates that Native American elders are among the most vulnerable and most underserved older adults in America.

A note of irony is struck to make the point: scenes of computer and aerobics classes at well-heeled senior centers in white communities are intercut with interior shots of ill-equipped reservation facilities in which volunteers struggle to stretch funds even to serve a weekly common meal of soup and bread. Juxtaposed with visual images of Indian elders living in isolation and poverty are readings from treaties, letters, and other historical documents pledging government care and support for Native peoples in return for the surrender of land, freedom, and livelihood.

Elders from several tribes, including Navajo, Sioux, and Tohono O’odam, discuss the difficulties they face. Poor nutrition, tumbledown dwellings, and inadequate sanitary facilities are the lot of many. Especially effective is the visual evocation of isolation on these particular reservations, where elders may live miles from any neighbors.

Prominent tribal leaders including Wilma Mankiller, Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation; Peterson Zah, President of the Navajo Nation; and Bill Anoatubby, Governor of the Chickasaw Nation, as well as Dr. Philip Lee, Director of the U.S. Public Health Service, and Fernando Torres-Gil, Assistant Secretary for the Administration on Aging, present a united front in this video. They state the need not only for adequate funding of existing Title VI programs — geared to provide nutrition support and “chore maintenance” — but for more diverse programs that address unmet needs, notably transportation, housing, legal services, and social and health programming.

Several existing programs are shown in which staff, often unpaid, attempt to stretch the Title VI dollar to provide some of these services. Particularly affecting is a scene in which a van driver travels a circuit covering more than a hundred miles of rough road just to round up a