

**Testimony of Connie Ross-Karl
Honorary Senior America
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Good morning. Thank you, Ranking Member Scott, participants and invited guests for the honor of speaking to you today. As the Senior America State Administrator for South Carolina and 2019 Honorary Senior America, I am proud to introduce you to a 42-year-old anomaly of a national movement of thousands of women whose founder is still a participant; to share my knowledge and experiences in anecdotes about successful aging and to capture how the enthusiasm for life that being a Queen at the age of elegance, 60 or older, dispels five of some the misconceptions of aging.

Among my other duties in the 90s as a marketing executive for the then sixth largest hotel in the world, Imperial Palace Las Vegas, I co-hosted a national television and radio show from the renowned Antique and Classic Auto Collection there for nearly a decade. These priceless, magnificent cars were old but of keen special interest, so a subtle theme is developing.

As TV folks are often asked to judge beauty pageants, I was asked to judge the Miss Nevada Senior America pageant.

One of the most popular TV commercials then was Mr. Whipple, the grocer, scolding customers, “please don't squeeze the Charmin!” Dick Wilson who made 38 movies nobody really remembered, he said, became a household name much later in his life for his series of Charmin toilet paper commercials. His wife, Meg, was one of the senior women competing for the title of Miss Senior Nevada that year, and that chance meeting was also my first introduction to Senior America as well as the start of a friendship with Meg and Dick.

He described acting in commercials as "the hardest thing to do in the entire acting realm." You've got about 30 seconds to introduce yourself,

introduce the product, say something nice about it and get off gracefully."

The Senior America Pageant recognizes physical fitness, of course, and seeks to emphasize that fitness comes in many shapes and sizes and that true beauty is a matter of insight as well as eyesight. As part of the judging process, therefore, each contestant also shares her own commercial, her personal "Philosophy of Life" with the audience so that the judges may develop an insight into each lady's own inner beauty. The thirty-second philosophy isn't a biography, but rather the wisdom that the contestant wishes to share with the younger generation. As Dick Wilson warned, this is much tougher than it appears. In fact, it has been described by many contestants as the most terrifying 30 seconds of their lives.

Misconception one: If you're interested in staying healthy as you age — and living longer — you might want to add a different set of muscles to your workout routine as do Senior America queens: your creative ones. Ongoing research suggests that creativity may be key to healthy aging. Studies show that participating in activities such as singing, theater performance and visual artistry could support the well-being of older adults, and that creativity, which is related to the personality trait of openness, can lead to greater longevity.

An onstage talent, gorgeous gown walk and personal interview by a panel of judges complete the entry criteria. By giving women 60 years of age and older an opportunity to display their "inner beauty," talents, and elegance, the pageant honors the achievements of senior women and motivates and encourages them to utilize their full potential to share a positive outlook on life with others. Participants represent a diverse, grass-roots, cross section of America. If you are looking for a group to promote successful aging, and want boots on the ground in any state and territory in the United States, we are here to help in high heels, gowns and crowns.

Hook us up with your senior centers; senior living facilities where we visit and entertain regularly; and departments of aging.

I bring you greetings and remembrances today from founder Dr. Al Mott and his wife, Elizabeth “Betsy” Apello Mott, president of Senior America. So we need to go back 20 years with Betsy and Al and revisit Las Vegas 2001.

Huge 60s stars Steve Rossi and Marty Allen, of the comedy team of Allen and Rossi, who appeared on more than 700 television shows, including two Ed Sullivan episodes on which the Beatles performed, were regular guests on our TV show. The title of one of their comedy albums was their signature catch phrase of "Hello Dere!" Still a popular greeting today...Steve passed at a young 82, but Marty lived for a wonderful 95 years.

Steve knew the Mott's. He introduced them to me and to the Imperial Palace as a possible venue to return the national pageant to Las Vegas. It was a marriage that was to last through 2008 there and even after the Imperial Palace was purchased and the pageant moved onto the famed home of Miss America, the Boardwalk in Atlantic City, where it has stayed until 2020. Then, because of Covid, the first virtual pageant was just held on August 22.

At the Imperial Palace, the younger male execs teased me mercilessly about hosting a pageant for old women, even making a tin-foil crown and ribbon sash for me as Ms. Senior Imperial Palace. I was already old to them in my mid-50s...Then the contestants arrived and the magic that is the spirit of Senior America began.

Senior America was not only good heads-in-beds hotel business, the candidates were knock-outs of beauty, brains, charm and show-stopping

talent. These guys were mesmerized and couldn't stop peeking into rehearsals and competitions. When Grandma enters a pageant, everybody comes! Restaurants and showrooms were full of active seniors and their friends and families. It was standing room only for the preliminaries and the finals. The state queens were like rock stars then and today. Steve and I had the honor and privilege of co-hosting the finals that first year back in Vegas.

Misconceptions two and three: Seniors are great business. And Senior America Queens may be old, but they're still hot!

According to Betsy Mott, the Ms. Senior America mission statement says that seniors are America's national treasure, and the foundation upon which our youth can build a better society, by way of our wisdom and experience. What we've learned as the years have passed, though, is that it's the pageant events themselves that are forging two types of an intangible, but very precious, asset, now called "social capital." It's the value derived from positive connections between people.

"People entering *seniorhood* have moved past their childhood friendships, away from their college pals, and out of the gang at the office. We tell them we're the last stop on the bus line—the friends they make with us are the ones they'll keep until the end. Friendships in *seniorhood* are more important than our friendships in youth—we need fun, and companionship, but we also need each other.

"When our local groups connect, friendships bloom across the country. We can travel to any state in the nation and not have to get a hotel room. We can just call a queen! This is the bridging type of social capital, and our bridges not only take us, but welcome us, into each other's worlds. We delight in the riches of each other's talents, outlooks and cultures. We learn from one another; our conversations are fresh and new; and we listen to one another because we really are hearing that story for the first time."

Misconception four: Senior can form important friendships late in life

that last to the end of life. Through social capital and its bridging effect into different, unique worlds, seniors can enjoy better physical, mental and emotional wellbeing. When Grandma's happy, everyone's happy...

Helping each other may be as simple as straightening a crown or as complicated as staying up all night putting ice on the face of a queen who has fallen but still has to escort on the red carpet, give out awards and perform the next day in a TV show produced for an audience of 11 million people. I was the fallen queen, SC10 Ida Brinkley was my diligent nurse. Falls, such as breaking a leg or a hip are our nemesis and happen sometimes at such events. A queen fell and broke her leg at the same event two years prior. She came back and won a national open age group pageant last year. SC15 Rebecca Rose Holley is strong, remarkable and determined. One of my sisters from 2007 fell at the national pageant, broke her hip, and was in recovery for about two years. Fran Owens came back and is now President of the National Senior America Alumni Association. She is represented here today by vice president Linda Anthony NC13.

We do watch out for and help each other get through just about everything. Betsy tells me that she has personally seen the support when the family has a problem or when a spouse passes away, which is sadly common among senior queens. Bernadette Dudek NJ9 lost her husband, the love of her life, more than a decade ago when she was living in New Jersey. The New Jersey Senior America organization embraced her and invited her to be a candidate for Ms. Senior New Jersey. On the second try, she won the state title and went on to be a finalist in the national pageant in 2009. She credits that sisterhood with uplifting and getting her through her grief. She competed again in the national pageant 10 years later as SC19, as she now lives in Ft. Mill SC.

We do uplift one another to be the best we can be, from inspiring others recovering from injury or illness to things as simple as good vision and dental health; organizing convenient group travel to showcases and events or just to be together; and always making sure we walk together and count noses on everyone's whereabouts when traveling. Moreover,

referencing the importance of insight as well as eyesight, we make sure at least one of us can still drive at night!

We do have our share of poignant moments. We all nearly passed out when Jon Bon Jovi dropped in backstage in Atlantic City, just because he was in the neighborhood. Dee Dee Sharp not only taught us to mash potato, she has joined us a judge, volunteer and now friend. Queens have been to the White House and are celebrities themselves. Laura Mcfayden SC12 was the best Judy Garland tribute artist in the world in 2012 and was first runner up to California Queen Elizabeth Howard who was a vocal coach for Pricilla Presley and Sting, among many others...Carolyn Curlew, Senior America 13, was lead singer in the Charlie Daniels Band.

I wore my Senior America banner when I climbed the Great Wall of China with an entourage of 40 young orchestra protégés on a cultural exchange and as my family walked behind the caisson carrying the remains of my WWII parents who were being laid to rest in Arlington in 2016 and was later swarmed that afternoon by wonderful South Carolina students visiting the Iwo Jima monument who saw my banner and wanted pictures! My Senior America banner and that sisterhood has been there for me and for thousands of others.

The Ms. Senior America Pageant, is a non-profit corporation designed not only to enrich the lives of seniors but also to tap their energy to enrich the lives of others. It is dedicated to diversity. As an organization it depends on volunteers and sponsors to continue to present the positive aspects of aging. The organization encourages queens to also have personal platforms, as well as that of Senior America, and offers a local, state and national stage and exposure for those philanthropies. Popular platforms have included supporting veterans, American Red Cross, animal welfare, Meals on Wheels and so many more. One of the most singular has been Marlisa K. Small's Bold and Beautiful Wigs for Cancer which gives a free, high quality out-of-the-box wig to men, women and children in treatment for cancer. Hers went from a local charity to national in conjunction with her reign as Ms. South Carolina Senior America 2018. Raquel Welch learned about Marlisa and that she

gives away Rachel's wigs through her charity. She wanted to help and donated a stunning personal gown for Marlisa to auction at her annual fund-raising gala. It brought \$10,000!

Fast forward from Vegas, I moved with my family, everybody from two to 82, to the Grand Strand of Myrtle Beach. I worked for an advertising agency who represented the Myrtle Beach Chamber of Commerce, and I was now 60. I was asked to come up with some creative ideas to put heads in beds in Myrtle Beach. Remember that subtle theme? I called Dr. Mott. The venues did not work out to host the national pageant, but I was named Ms. SC Senior America 2007 and was first runner up to the national queen that year. I have now actively worked in the aging community for more than 20 years and have lots more stories...

So, last and Misconception five: Pageants are not finite at any age. We are more than queens of the old people. There are many women deserving of recognition, and participants truly do represent a cross section of America.

Thank you for helping us in honoring the "Age of Elegance," women 60 and above in this exciting and constructive program:

Meet mother-daughter North Carolina senior queens, former high school chemistry lab partner of Bandstand fame, Dick Clark, Sarah Brooks, 93 1/2, and daughter Frann Brooks Griffen, president of the NC Cameo Club. They are one of three mother/daughter queens participating, one such mother served in World War II and was Ms. Veteran America.

Dreisa Sherrill, reigning Ms. Senior World and Ms. SC Senior America 2022 and Gary Sherrill, certified Miss America judge and a North Carolina Field Director for Miss America.

Joe Flowers, co-state administrator for SC Senior America, certified Miss America judge and a Miss America local executive director.

Welcome the new Ms. Senior America 2021, Laura Morgan, and her king, Dr. Jeff Morgan, Chief of Staff - Fayetteville VA Coastal Carolina Healthcare System. Laura is the first national queen from North

Carolina and a first-ever virtual national queen. Congratulations, Laura. We are all so proud of you and look forward to your memorable reign.

More than a beauty pageant, Senior America is *a re-affirmation of life and self-worth.*