Laura Bush Talks Aging Gracefully As Poll Finds Seniors More Engaged In Their Health

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With roughly a fifth of the U.S. population set to be older than 65 come 2050, a new study has found that seniors are largely more motivated to take control of their own health by exercising and dieting than in the past, metrics that help lower future healthcare costs and promote aging gracefully.

Former First Lady Laura Bush, 67, gave the keynote speech at the 39th annual n4a Conference & Trade Show at the Hyatt Regency after the survey’s findings were announced on Tuesday. She spoke of the importance of living a full life no matter your age, a point she illustrated by discussing her father-in-law and former President George H.W. Bush’s propensity to strap on a parachute and hurl himself out of an airplane to celebrate his birthday, as he did for his ninetieth.

More realistic for the boomers in the crowd was her anecdote regarding mother-in-law Barbara Bush, who, at 89, still makes time to walk her dogs on the beach at their summer home in Kennebunkport, Maine.

“All we know we have is now,” Bush said. “So take advantage of your life as it is and take a walk on that beach while you can.”

The survey found that 37 percent of seniors say they exercise each day, up from 26 percent last year. This also brought them optimism: Seniors who reported setting personal health goals—53 percent of those interviewed—were twice as likely to say their quality of life will improve and three times as likely to believe their general health would be better than those who didn’t.

“We’re starting to see the recognition that everybody should be active,” said James Firman, president and Chief Executive Officer of the National Council on Aging.
“We’re seeing the tipping point where people realize that it’s not just the nice thing to do but the necessary thing to do.”

The survey polled 1,000 adults 60 or older and compared the findings with a group of 1,027 18- to 59-year-olds. Of the older category, two thirds were between 60 and 74. Bush and the panelists—which included Firman as well as n4a CEO Sandy Markwood and United Healthcare’s Chief Medical Office for Retiree Services Rhonda Randall—were encouraged by the findings.

And population predictions illustrate how good that is: According to the U.S. Census, the amount of residents older than 65 will reach 83.7 million by 2050. That’s about 20 percent of the population, up from 12 percent in 2000 and 8 percent in 1950. That spike, according to the Congressional Budget Office, means that the need for assistance will “increase sharply” as the decades progress.

According to the survey, 77 percent of those polled said they planned to live the rest of their years in their current home. Seventeen percent said no. Those numbers become more specific when asked what they would do if they could no longer care for themselves: 48 percent said they would move to an assisted living facility.

“They realized we all think we want to live in our home for the rest of our lives, but that probably isn’t going to happen,” Firman said.

Bush was lucky, she says. Before he died, her elderly father recognized he wouldn’t be able to drive and put the keys aside. Her mother, who still lives in a facility in Midland, recognized she could no longer care for herself and made arrangements to move into an assisted living facility while the Bushes were still in the White House.

“She says, ‘You know how your knees get old? Well, so does your brain,’” Bush said.

The panelists advised seniors to age among a community, to stay mentally sharp and exercise. They said the survey’s discovery that seniors are more engaged this year than last with their own health, a positive trend considering many will receive treatment via Medicare.

“It really reinforced what we believe, that people age successfully in a community,” Markwood said. “It’s really the support system you have around you.”

The survey was a joint project between the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging, the National Council on Aging, UnitedHealthcare, and USA TODAY.