

Dignity in Aging: Culture's Responsibility

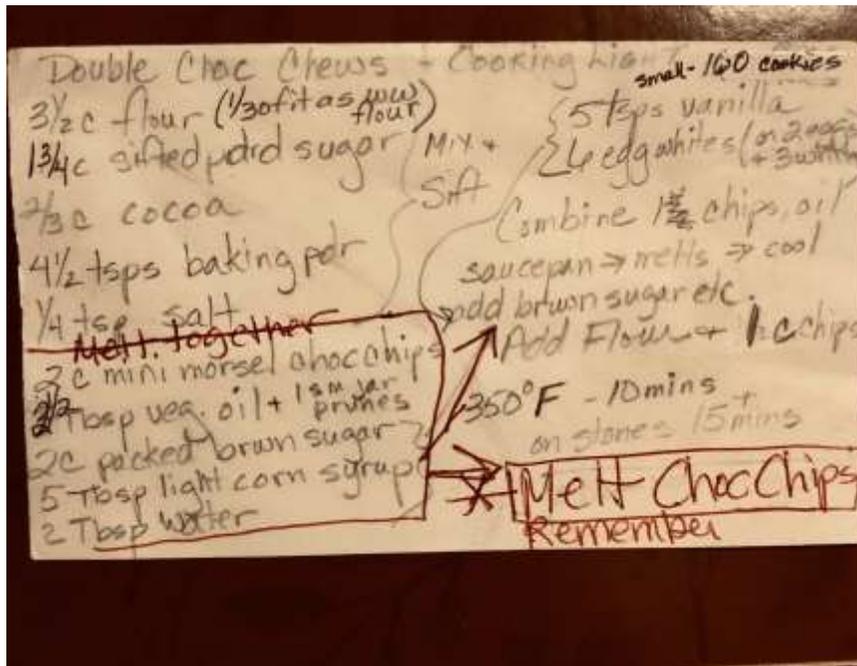
Annika Taylor, Regis sDPT 2022

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My sweet Grandmother Marge went to be with her Maker almost 10 years ago. One of my fondest memories with her is learning how to bake her famous double chocolate cookies, which she then stored in her big basement freezer for us grandchildren to sneak down and devour. She taught me an immense amount about practical life, about painting, about fixing things based on pure ingenuity before the era of “the YouTube expert.” With all of this acquired wisdom, care and deep knowledge, Grandma Marge did have struggles, specifically insecurity with the outward appearance of her aging body. As I think back to those moments now, I wonder if I could have responded to Grandma in an encouraging way to help educate her on the aging process and bring new positivity to that process. I wonder also how ageism has grown with our culture and infiltrated and influenced my thoughts as well as the thoughts of society as a whole, resulting in the marginalization of older adults.

Like a fine cabernet sauvignon that deepens in flavor, depth, and value with age, so have our older adult community members acquired deep wisdom, family bonds, stories and life experiences with their years. Yet in our current culture, we are experiencing a chasm in respect and understanding from the younger population towards older adults. In order to bridge this gap, we can initiate open conversations with our young and older adult communities about the valuable experiences that older adults bring to society as well as talk about the benefits of aging that are nearly universal.¹ It is important to educate children young about aging and to portray the older adult community in a

positive light and perspective for them. To do so, we can share stories with children about the upbringing, culture, activities, family and school life that their elders experienced and create an environment for intergenerational activities such as playing games, coloring, going for walks, making meals, and storytelling.¹

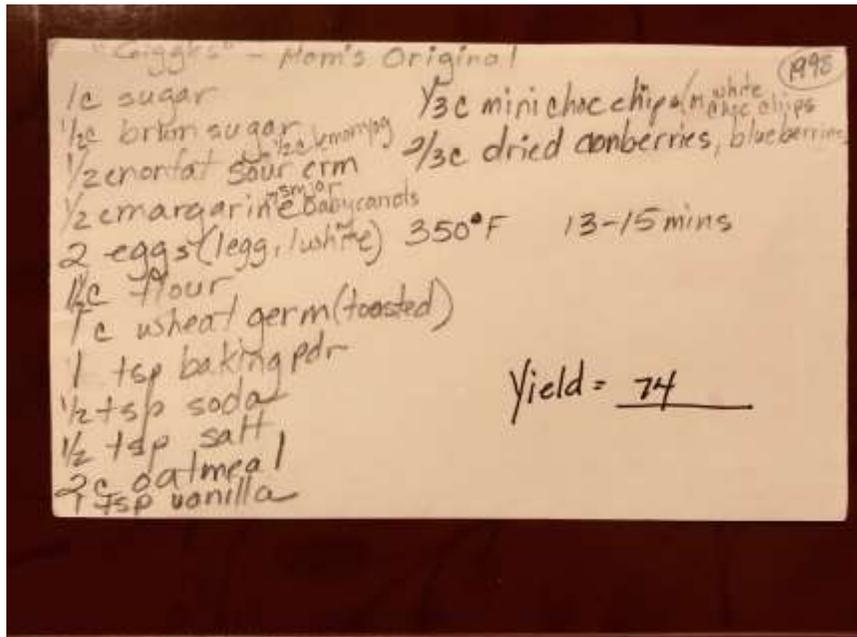


Grandma Marge's Double Chocolate Cookie Recipe, well worn

Practically, there are many ways that we can actively reduce ageism in our society². According to Burnes, et al, research has shown that ageism (such as discrimination, prejudice, and negative stereotypes) leads to direct detrimental effects on the physical and mental health of older adults. The ever-increasing influence of technology in society is creating a social gap between younger and older adults, where in past generations, more time was directly spent, face-to-face with multiple generations.³ This shift in culture has increased the prevalence of ageism in society.³ Thankfully, we can act to reduce this gap. By engaging in intergenerational activities, intentional

conversation and educating ourselves and others about the aging process, we can seek to reconnect with older adults and reduce our negative biases.^{2,4}

As a future Doctor of Physical Therapy and as a grandchild of Grandma Marge, I see it as my duty to the older adult population that I will be serving to advocate for their fair, respectful treatment in society and in healthcare, and to help bring dignity and a positive mentality back to the value of the aging process through my word and deed.



Grandma Marge's "Giggle" Cookie Recipe, passed down by my mother to me.

References

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