

SAGE Give Forward Interview -- Ward Greene, Founder of SAGE

This is a written transcript of a 2024 interview between Eric Alan and Ward Greene regarding Greene's efforts to give forward through SAGE. Eric Alan conducted the interview. He is an author, photographer, lyricist, and feral forest resident. He is the author of several books, including *Grateful by Nature*, which offers gratitude as our shared path home, within a return to nature. Ward Greene is the founder of SAGE. The interview focuses on the work of SAGE.

Eric: Ward Greene chairs the Board of Directors for SAGE (Senior Advocates for Generational Equity). He's also practiced law for over four decades including his current position as Senior Counsel at the law firm of Farleigh Wada Witt in Portland, Oregon. He has served as the President of the Multnomah Bar Association, Vice President of the Oregon Bar, and on the Board of Ascent Funding. Thanks for taking the time to discuss SAGE today, Ward.

Ward: It's a pleasure. Thanks for having me on your show.

Eric: How would you define generational equity?

Ward: That's a question that really goes to the heart of SAGE. That is the concept of leaving the world no worse off than we found it. Every time I think about the opportunities I had as a young person, and I try to compare that to what people are looking at today, I think, well we have not honored our duty as elders. Generational equity means the next generation, and the one after, and after that, and after that should all have roughly the same opportunities.

Eric: So how does SAGE as an organization aim to further that equity?

Ward: The goal really is a simple one. We always think in terms of inspiring elders. We use the term to give forward, and all that really means for us is to set an example, to show people the pathways to offer some guidance and inspiration. What we've found is that people generally, when they stop and think about generational equity, they know that it's their obligation as much as it is ours.

Eric: How is that reflected in specific programs that SAGE produces?

Ward: That's a good question too because it's difficult to measure the effect. SAGE has a number of different programs that are calculated to achieve the goal of inspiring people, but to do so in different ways.

One of our annual projects is something we call the Visiting SAGE. We've brought in speakers from all over the country who have important messages to share. Just as an example, we recently had David Brooks in Portland. David is a New York Times Columnist who published a book titled the Second Mountain, and what he really talked about was how sometimes after we've climbed the first mountain which is usually our career and maybe our family, that there's time to tackle a second mountain, and that's really what we're talking about with most of our SAGE projects.

The Visiting SAGE is a major project. We had, for example, Sylvia Earle come to town. Now for those who don't know she is regarded as the queen of the ocean. Sylvia Earle has been an oceanographer and a scientist for five decades and came to Portland and spoke to over nine hundred people about the health of our oceans. Now spoiler alert: they're not healthy and it's our fault. So anyway, the Visiting SAGE is a way for us to introduce people to the organization and to get them interested.

We also have something we call the SAGE Fellowship, which is a way to help train people to sort of start their own projects to do the kind of work that we think will benefit future generations.

We have something we call our Citizen Project: we have occasional presentations encouraging people to look harder at how we communicate with each other. You'd be amazed (maybe Eric you wouldn't be) but people generally would be amazed at how difficult we've made it to communicate across party lines, and across age lines, and across gender lines, and the Citizen Project really strives to encourage people, you might say, to let down their defenses a bit, and to listen better, and to work on finding solutions.

We also have what we call Connect and Engage programs where we have local seminars and the like, and we have a mentoring program where we have seniors who help to teach kids reading and math skills, all of which really is designed as much to help the elders become engaged as it is to help kids learn and grow.

So anyway, SAGE has a lot of different ways to hopefully promote the overall mission of engaging seniors to make things a little better for the next generation.

Eric: SAGE focuses on three particular areas: education, environment, and economy. Why those three areas?

Ward: I'm smiling as I answer this. Initially it was partly because of my experience as a trial lawyer knowing that you should simplify a message, and you should try to make it one that you can show on the fingers of one hand, so that if you talking to a judge, a jury you can keep organized what your goals, what your thoughts, what your major points are.

So, when we were trying to organize the way to describe our separate goals, the idea of "Three Es" popped into my head, again because it's really easy to remember. And, as it happens (you could probably argue this point) but I would say that when you're looking at what we're leaving for the next generation, if you identify the environment as one "E", you'd have to say: "wow that includes things like clean air, clean water, climate change". It includes all of those environmental aspects that are really crucial to a healthy and happy life, but that's not enough.

Then you say: "well, what do kids need?" "What is it we should be doing as elders, as the generation in control, and education pops to mind, of course right?" Don't you have to have an educated population in order to achieve the goals that we're after? So, there's my second "E": Education.

And then economy, that's one that really is a little more subtle, but you know if people don't have a reasonable chance to provide for themselves and their families, if they don't have an equal opportunity to have a decent job, to have some work that they can value and feel valued at, the rest of your goals are going to fail. So, there's your third "E": the economy.

Anyway, it became pretty easy to group our goals under the sort of heading of the Three Es, and as it happens almost everything we do fits in one or another, or maybe more than one.

Eric: My perspective would be that almost any project can fit in all three categories; that it is just a matter of which is primary within those three. Would you agree with that?

Ward: I think that's right. If we're doing it right you would say you need education to understand the importance of environmental changes, and any of this. Any goal requires that people be able to support themselves, and you might say that the luxury of thinking about future generations. One of the things I've observed is that when someone is struggling, when they are worried about putting food on the table, if they're worried about having shelter, if they're worried about their kids' health, it's pretty hard to worry about the next generation.

So, I agree with you Eric. I think if you don't accept all three of those as important pillars supporting the achievement of our goals, you're probably not going to be successful.

Eric: Within those broader areas you have individual volunteers that focus on individual projects. What particular skill sets, talents, or interests do you look for in SAGE volunteers?

Ward: Again, you're forcing me to chuckle because it's really simple: anybody who has a sense of what I regard as a moral imperative, that we really have a duty to help out. The skill set can be as simple as a willingness to help collect questionnaires at the end of a public engagement. Anything from -- We have retired teachers who are skilled at helping kids with their reading skills. So, you might say for a mentor, training as a teacher is good. But really, a SAGE volunteer can be anyone who recognizes the duty to give forward, to be part of a joyful solution, and not somebody who's just watching the world pass by. So, it's pretty easy to qualify as a volunteer.

Eric: SAGE does frame this effort as a giving forward among people over fifty years of age. But giving is often receiving. So, what return to SAGE volunteers tend to receive in the process of their giving?

Ward: You might say the “secret sauce”, the magic of working with SAGE and volunteering for SAGE and spreading the message of SAGE, is that the people who do that wind up telling us that they get more than they give.

Especially the mentors. It's fascinating to me that some of our seniors who will spend hours working with kids - at the end of the day they always say, “I get more out of this than my kids do”.

So, I guess I would say that the consideration, the investment, the return, whatever you want to call it, is pretty hard to measure but it's very real. And the science (and there are statistics for this, I don't have them at my fingertips, but we have him on our web page), but the reality is people who give forward, people who participate, people who direct their generosity at others (the next generation and the ones that follow) wind up being healthier, happy, living longer, and feeling a sense of fulfillment that other people don't have.

I like to think that you get back a lot more than you put in.

Eric: Convincing those members of the older generation to give is one aspect of SAGE's success; another needs to be convincing the younger generation to receive from those elders. How does SAGE communicate what it has to offer to organizations and projects and people that could benefit from SAGE's efforts?

Ward: The work of giving forward really does require intergenerational work. It requires connecting with younger people. It is at times, you might say, a paradox: we work with older folks but we tried to figure out ways to help younger folks, and the one thing I'd have to say we've noticed over and over again, is that most younger people actually are interested in what seniors have to say.

Now there's a limit. If all you're doing is going on and on about how good it was in the good old days, you'll lose your audience pretty fast. But we have found that especially for younger kids (the ones who can benefit from mentoring and from reading and math instruction), they welcome the connection with the older folks --

To get down to nuts and bolts, like with our mentoring (which we do at Parkrose Middle School here in Portland), what we had to do was to make a connection with the principal of that school, and to convince her that there would be a benefit; that our mentors weren't going to take away from jobs that other professional teachers were doing, but that they were going to add to that.

And so, it was partly getting the right person to connect us with the kids, but every project has its own special requirements and special challenges, but connecting with younger people is part of the magic of what we tried to do.

Eric: What have been the greatest joys and challenges for you personally in your participation in the SAGE project?

Ward: Connecting with the other seniors (that is, people who are aligned with SAGE's goal). It's been such a joyful kind of friendship. I've managed to meet people who are generous, who are loving, who are kind, people who really share this sense of joy that for me has been exciting. I refer to this as energizing. It's like I feel more positive about the future, but it's mostly from the people I've met rather than any particular event or particular achievement.

I have to comment that as we've talked about "what do we hope to do at SAGE", for example getting David Brooks to come and speak was one of those things that we had talked about for a long time. Seemed impossible. He's a very, very, highly regarded columnist, a writer, a thinker, headquartered in New York and Washington, but we achieve goals partly by assuming that success is inevitable.

And it seems crazy, but I have it in mind that maybe we'll get Michelle Obama to come and speak. And somebody would look at me and say, "well Ward how on earth could you do that?" And I say "I don't know, but I can do it", and it may be a matter of luck, it may be a matter of persistence, it may be a matter of simply not giving up, but we've managed to achieve a lot just by assuming we can do it, and often it gets done.

Eric: What particular skills and talents and passions do you bring from your personal experience that you want to communicate to others in the process of that joy that you speak about?

Ward: I don't really think I have any special qualities or talents or aptitudes. I have been told that I present myself as a very happy person, and I can't explain how that came to be. I suspect my mother, my grandmother, they were very happy, loving people.

I don't know what somebody does that creates a desire to participate and to feel that. So, I don't know, really if I have anything that I regard as a special quality, or anything that I have to give, or that qualifies me to do that, other than I just love doing it.

Eric: The happiness is actually an incredible skill that's only cultivated over a lifetime. When I was getting ready for this project I was talking to my collaborator Dewitt Jones - former National Geographic photographer on whom I worked with a project called "Celebrate What's Right with the World". He talked about reframing the question: instead of "giving forward", as "overflowing", that when we're in those places in which we have the greatest joy

and the greatest happiness, and we can't help but share it: that that is where the greatest learning and communication takes place. Would you agree with that?

Ward: Well, I love framing the concept as “overflowing”. I totally agree.

I guess I would say one of the reasons for SAGE is the recognition that in this country, in this time, we have abundance. We have an abundance of resources, an abundance of talent, an abundance of ways to share. I guess maybe overflowing is another way to say, “it's not a matter of making sure I have enough, of course I do”. It's really much more a matter of making sure that the abundance, this overflowing, is something that other people get to experience. So, I love the way to frame that sort of magic of having more than enough.

Eric: It's amazing when we see what we have as enough, how much more appears.

Ward: Well, it's true that (and there are a lot of cliches) -- I find myself referring to lyrics from popular songs from time to time. But (I think Sheryl Crow has a line) it's something like “it's not getting what you want, it's wanting what you have.” And I think there are a lot of ways to say that: recognizing that we already have everything we need.

It's a very, very, comforting and even, I would say empowering sensibility. Some people might say “well easy for you to say Ward”. I'm a successful lawyer, I've got a nice house, a nice car, but those aren't the things that really give you the most happiness.

I think anybody, so long as they've got their health, I think they have reasons for overflowing, and I encourage people to experience that.

Eric: Is there anything else about the SAGE project or about the feeling of overflowing that you'd like to share before we close?

Ward: Well, when we have our events, we sometimes end with a circle of love. We sometimes end with everyone sharing one takeaway. We try to get everybody involved and encourage people to think about those things that have given them joy, and for which they're grateful.

And then we close by saying “pass it on”.

And all I would say is, for anyone who has experienced that (especially if it's someone who's been to a SAGE event and who has been touched, and who has felt excited about the prospect of taking generational equity as their own mission and their own goal): pass it on. It's a good thing.

Eric: Well, thank you so much for passing it on.

Ward: Glad to do it. Thank you, Eric.

Eric: Ward Green, Chair of the Board of Directors of SAGE (Senior Advocates for Generational Equity). For more information on SAGE and how to become involved go online to WeAreSage.org. I'm Eric Alan, thanks again for being here with us Ward, really appreciate your efforts.

Ward: My pleasure.