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— Heidemarie Burke

# DEFYING AGE STEREOTYPES

On her 65th birthday in 2010, Heidemarie Burke skated onto the ice at Germain Arena in Estero, Florida, and performed a simple routine of turns and crossovers. As the music ended, she took a bow as the crowd cheered. Burke won a medal at that competition sponsored by U.S. Figure Skating (her first!), but says the real victory was that she challenged her body in ways she wouldn’t have thought possible just a few years earlier. Best of all, she didn’t fall.



**N**ow 71, the Englewood, Florida, resident and H2U member at Englewood Community Hospital, is hooked on competitive figure skating and has the sparkly costumes to prove it.

“When they open the doors to the rink, it’s like Alice in Wonderland. I feel like I’m going into another world,” she says. “Skating is like flying.”

Burke is one of a growing number of older adults who aren’t spending their retirement doing what most people expect from retirees. In fact, many seniors are finding ways to find new wings in everything from gymnastics to music to stand-up comedy.

## NOTHING TO LOSE

Burke never considered herself an athlete. As a young girl, she often tried to skip gym class, preferring books to sports. And though her job as a professional photographer is physically demanding, she rarely went to the gym.

In her 60s, however, Burke took her first skating class for adults and loved the sensation of gliding on the ice. Now she also loves the thrill of spins and jumps. She is so passionate about skating that she regularly drives more than an hour to get to her local ice rink.

She has decades on most of the teenage girls who compete against her. “They progress much faster,” she says. “I’m not that driven competition-wise. I just want to see what I can get out of my 71-year-old body.”

In addition to group and private skating lessons, Burke also takes yoga classes. Because of it, “my legs look better, and my bottom is tighter,” she says with a laugh.

A few years ago, Burke fell and broke her wrist, so now she wears wrist guards, knee pads and other protective gear. “It cuts down the fear factor,” she says. She also learned how to fall in a way that reduces the risk of injuries.

“As adults, we still get to look good and wear costumes,” she says. She buys her costumes used and takes them to her seamstress, who sews on Swarovski crystals for a little extra bling.

“My challenge is learning how to smile and relax,” she says. Though she gets nervous before performances, she always reassures herself by saying, “No one knows me. What do I have to lose?”

## STRETCHING YOURSELF

Burke is not the only one to defy stereotypes in a sport dominated by teens and young adults. The NBC series *Little Big Shots*, which usually features talented children, recently televised a *Forever Young* episode highlighting superstar seniors like gymnast Johanna Quaas. As the 91-year-old athlete flipped around in a floor exercise and on the parallel bars, the audience gasped.

After Quaas performed, Simone Biles, the four-time gold medal winner at the 2016 Rio Summer Olympics,

greeted Quaas on stage and hung a gold medal around her neck. Biles called the 91-year-old gymnast an encouraging role model to the women’s Olympic gymnastics team.

“We watch her videos,” Biles says. “She is an inspiration to everyone. I hope I can walk when I’m 90.”

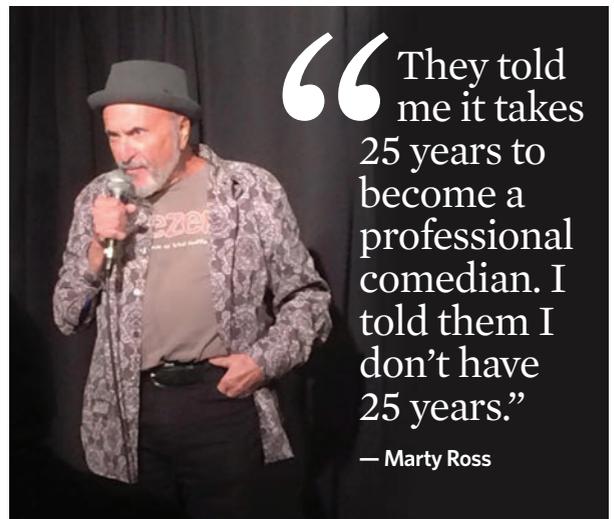
Other seniors are trying new ventures they were too busy to do in their youth.

Consider Marty Ross, a 77-year-old retired clothing salesman. He says he was successful in sales partly because of his sense of humor. After retiring, he enrolled in a comedy workshop and discovered he liked the adrenaline rush of telling jokes on stage.

“They told me it takes 25 years to become a professional comedian. I told them I don’t have 25 years,” he quips. “They call me precocious.”

Billing himself as the “wrinkled rebel,” he cracks jokes about the misery of aging, which his older fans love. Young audience members get a kick out of seeing someone who looks like their grandfather but acts “like a wrinkled old teenager.” Ross gets so pumped after performances that he sometimes has trouble sleeping at night.

He hosts a monthly show at a club in Burbank, California, and invites other comedians to perform there, too. In finding and nurturing fellow comedians, he sees a connection to his former life.



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“It’s not that different from my clothing career,” he says. “I used to spot styles and colors and trends of clothes. Now, I’m able to spot comedians.”

Ross has performed in Las Vegas and made a comedy CD—*Wrinkled Rebel: Going Down Fighting, But First, A Nap*—to help him spread the laughs. Inspiring other seniors to try something completely new is part of what Ross loves about his late-start career.

“Whatever you’ve done in the past, when you get old, you can do whatever you want to do. You don’t have to be good at it. Just do it. I know so many people who don’t do anything. I say, what are you waiting for? Death?”

Ross thinks his age may actually give him an edge over some younger comedians. “I am not going through the neurosis of most comedians,” he says. “I don’t have to drink before I go on stage.”

## YOU’VE GOT THE MUSIC IN YOU

Dick Gray, 82, has also taken up performing late in life. Gray remembers playing a harmonica for a few minutes as a kid, then laying it down and eventually losing the instrument. Seven decades later, he’s picked up where he left off.

Today, the Lawrenceville, Georgia, resident plays the harmonica and sings for the Hi-Lo Chorus, a group of about 50 seniors who perform regularly in the community. The Eastside Medical Center in Snellville, Georgia, sponsors the choir.



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Even though he is a retired lieutenant colonel from the Army Reserves and a retired salesman, Gray still gets a little nervous before he stands up in front of a group to perform. But his jitters go away as soon as he sees the smiles from the crowd.

“I get a particular kick when a little old lady will come up to me and put her hand on my arm and tell me I remind her of her daddy or granddaddy playing harmonica,” says Gray, who is called the “harmonica man.”

Gray originally joined the Hi-Lo group as a singer at the urging of his friend, Mary Ethridge of Grayson, Georgia. As a founding member of the chorus, Ethridge, 87, has been its pianist for 12 years. Playing the piano takes Ethridge back to her childhood when her mother taught her to play.

“My mother would listen to me from the kitchen while she was cooking. She would say, ‘Your left hand is too heavy. You played the wrong note.’ I later learned to play the boogie-woogie that way.”

Ethridge knows it takes a lot of courage for seniors to perform in front of an audience for the first time, and she helps fellow singers overcome the jitters. She recently invited a new member of the Hi-Lo Chorus to her house to practice together so the woman would feel confident for her first performance. She also coaches singers on how to connect to their audience.

“I believe in encouraging people to do what they want to try,” she says. “It has made my life wonderful. It has made it so rewarding.” ■



## AGE COULDN’T HOLD THESE PEOPLE BACK

In July, [Azriel Blackman](#), 92, celebrated 75 years as a mechanic at American Airlines, though he now does support tasks, rather than turning wrenches or climbing ladders.

In 2007, [Nola Ochs](#) became the world’s oldest college graduate at age 95. Three years later, she earned her master’s degree. She passed away in 2016 at age 105.

[Georgina Harwood](#) went skydiving for the first time at age 92. On her 100th birthday in 2015, she celebrated by skydiving for a third time and scuba diving with sharks.

At 64, [Diana Nyad](#) became the first person to swim across the Florida Straits without a shark cage.

[Ruth Flowers](#)—better known as DJ Mamy Rock—became a club music DJ in 2009 at age 68 after joking about it with her grandson. The British grandmother performed around Europe until her death in 2014.

Last January, [Robert Marchand](#) set a new world record when he cycled about 14 miles in one hour—at the age of 105. ■