

Written Testimony of Sheila Whitelaw

U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging

“Missed by the Recovery: Solving the Long-term Unemployment Crisis for Older Workers.”

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I came to this country in 1960 with a bachelor's degree in English literature. I married in 1962 and promptly had two daughters while we were living in Philadelphia. By 1972, I decided that I needed to go back to work and found a part time job, which turned into a full-time Office Manager position. We moved from the City to the suburbs, so that my daughters could receive a great education, and I found a job locally. I stayed in that position for at least 8 years.

I then worked for three different non-profit art organizations as Executive Director. I never earned a lot of money but really enjoyed working for worthwhile causes. My last position as Executive Director of the Friends of the Free Library was cut short as my daughter was diagnosed with Chronic Myelogenous Leukemia (CML) and was in need of a transplant. Her donor was miraculously a perfect match and we moved to Seattle, Washington for about 5 months. When we returned to Philadelphia I took care of my daughter for about a year, until she could return to work.

I never returned to the Friends of the Free Library as I didn't feel the same about the job because I was in a caregiver mode. So, I found a part-time nanny job. I stayed with the family for 4 years and then decided that I needed to be back in the workforce because I missed interacting with adults. I found a job as a Sales Associate in the women's clothing business and worked my way up to Manager of the store. But unfortunately in January 2010 the store lost its lease and the owner decided not to relocate. I applied for unemployment benefits and was approved.

Then came the hardest job of all - looking for work. At 71 years of age, I didn't know how long it might take to find a job; the economy was in bad shape with millions of people out of work. I started sending out my resume to hundreds of jobs. I have had about 15 interviews, but I rarely even receive a response afterward. It then occurred to me that a potential employer could look me up on the internet and lo and behold there was my age, clearly printed for all to see! I sensed my inability to find work had something to do with age, but I couldn't prove it. Many jobs required me to enter my date of birth to even complete my online application.

On one occasion, I had gone on an interview at Bloomingdales for a British clothing company that was opening a boutique inside Bloomingdales. While I was being interviewed, the potential employer took a call from another person looking for work, he made arrangements to interview her the next day (I could hear the conversation as I was sitting across the desk) and he even mentioned her name! I was not hired. A couple of weeks later my friend and I took a little trip to Bloomingdales to see if indeed this person was hired. And of course she was, and we estimated she was in her mid-20's. It was then obvious to me that age was a huge factor.

Last August I had to put my husband in a nursing home, as he is suffering from Alzheimers. This was a huge decision for me, but after he attacked me I had no choice. In September of 2011 my unemployment ran out and I was desperate. I was offered a position in a gift shop in a hotel in Philadelphia.

I took the job, knowing full well it really was not what I wanted, but felt I had no choice. The conditions of the shop were deplorable. Mice were running around the space, and their

droppings were everywhere. I was stationed in an office the size of a closet, and it had no lights. In lieu of a chair, because the space was so small, I was expected to sit on milk crates. I stayed in that position for 5 days and after discovering mice droppings in my bag, I decided to leave. A couple of weeks later, I received a letter from the unemployment compensation department that I was eligible for an extension of benefits. I filled out the forms and had to tell them that I took a position for 5 days and the reason that I left. I was then denied my benefits but could have a hearing to fight it. I had the hearing and the adjudicator turned down my request. I then applied for a second hearing and was told that I was denied.

I moved to a smaller apartment with cheaper rent. I applied for Food Stamps (never thinking in my lifetime that I would have to do this). I receive Social Security and \$35 per month in Food Stamps. I look for work every single day, including weekends. I have sent out hundreds and hundreds of resumes and cold called many stores. I have gotten assistance and support from retirementjobs.com, which I am grateful for, but I have not found work as of yet.

I have years of experience, am a loyal employee, have superior customer service skills, and want and need to work. I am sure, although it is hard to prove, that age is a real problem. When people talk about elderly they think 50!! I'd like to be 50 again. Some of the positions I interviewed for are now re-appearing on the job boards. One does wonder of course what happened to my resume, but I guess the days of looking at previous applicants who have applied for jobs doesn't seem to hold out anymore.

At this point, I don't really expect to retire, even if I am able to find a job. I plan to keep working as long as I am physically able, and I am blessed to be in good health. Contrary to what many employers think, age is just a number. My age does not define my ability, negate my work experience, or reduce my dedication to the job at hand.