

plan ahead to ensure happiness of silver years

David Lan (18-11-2003)

Through arrangements made by the Civil Service Bureau of the HKSAR government, I was very pleased to have the opportunity to talk to a group of some 300 ex-colleagues who are reaching retirement age - to share with them my personal experience for the past 3 years as a retired public servant.

To me, retirement is an art that forms a vital and integral part of one's life, just like when one enters school as a child, commencing a life-long career as a young person or getting married to start a totally new life with the right person as a spouse. Everything needs careful planning and proper handling, because retirement forms a very important part of your life, particularly if you want to achieve good results and long-lasting happiness.

First of all, I disagree with the description that retirement is the last stretch of one's life. Oh no! Even when one retires from the public service (or from one's profession or life-long career in the private sector) at the age of 60, one can still expect some 30 years of time lying ahead, bearing in mind the incredible progress of medical science in recent years, such as brain and open heart surgery etc. Therefore, how good or how bad the future 30 years of time (perhaps even longer) is going to be, depends to a great extent on the retiree personally.

Maintaining good health is absolutely vital and important for everyone, but more so for people reaching retirement age. Apart from listening to expert advice given by doctors, dieticians and health experts, my personal experience tells me that regular and adequate physical exercise is of paramount importance to a retired person. I advised my ex-colleagues to be extremely persistent and to award the highest possible priority to doing some form of exercise that they enjoy doing regularly whether it be golf, tai-chi, tennis, gymnastics, table-tennis, walking or what not. I, myself have chosen swimming and I rather go skipping a meal or not attending some social function than not going to the pool on a day. It is so easy to find good excuses for not doing physical exercise in the Hong Kong environment. And if you have not yet formed the habit of enjoy doing some form of exercise, start right now with the advice of a doctor. It is better to be late than never. Regular exercise provides you with extra energy, vitality and real relaxation that slows down the process of growing old.

After having taken a series of long and/or short trips in the first 6 or 12 months of

one's retired life, it seems necessary to do some work whether paid or unpaid voluntary work, otherwise life gets a bit boring. My definition of life after retirement is switching from doing work because it is an obligation to working for the sake of enjoyment. When you feel happy and enjoyable as you work, then it is the busier the merrier. A gifted painter or musician simply enjoys life if he spent long hours everyday painting or playing the piano or violin. Indeed he will feel unhappy if he is forbidden to "work hard". Under normal circumstances, a retired person could financially afford to be a little choosy and to embark on work (whether paid or unpaid or merely picking up a hobby) that he loves to do. I, myself, have, chosen not to take up any full time appointment, but have instead, taken up a number of part time jobs as advisor or director to a number of corporations, in addition to taking up massive amount of unpaid voluntary work. On most days I have a rather busy diary, but I can always make arrangements to take long or short trips out of Hong Kong whenever necessary. The most important thing is I feel happy with my present life style and I feel I am still making positive contribution to the Hong Kong society. This feel good factor in addition to having something positive to look forward to the future is very important towards achieving the target of living a happy and healthy life.

When discussing about paid work to supplement a retiree's income, we naturally touched upon investment and/or starting a new business after retirement. I warned my colleagues that through on the job training during their life-long career, with only the very few exceptions, most public servants (also true for some in the private sector) turn out to be not very good businessmen. Therefore, they must be extremely careful if they consider investing their life-long saving and capital lump sum in the stock or real estate market or start operating an entirely new business venture. Perhaps the best form of investment in a business venture is to invest only their time, technical / professional skills and expert knowledge they gained through past working experience. A retired person simply cannot afford to take any risk on their life-long saving. Whatever capital or pension lump sum they have earned can only be invested in the bluest of blue chips and other forms of risk free investments.

Hong Kong's aging population is growing in size and in proportion. The 2001 figure shows that 11% of our population (750 000 people) are 65 years old or above and by 2031 this group will be increased to 24 % of the population. If Hong Kong's elderly can generally remain fit and healthy, it will help greatly to reduce the ever-growing burden on medical and health expenses from the public purse. Furthermore, if a sizable proportion of our elderly live a rich and happy life, this could help to maintain and build social stability for Hong Kong. On the contrary, if our society encourages the setting of a limit to label people above certain age as "elderly retirees" unsuitable

to do any form of work, not only are we robbing this group of their right to contribute to society, but also we are creating a larger than necessary burden to all tax payers. I strongly advocate that the SAR government should encourage Hong Kong as a whole to package some suitable opportunities for the elderly to continue making their contribution to the society - through the creation of numerous voluntary work opportunities or paid jobs with shorter working hours but at full market value, i.e. without any element of subsidy. Hong Kong should allow capable retirees to have the equal opportunity (under perfect and free competition) to earn a fruitful life by demonstrating their ability to stand on their own feet, rather than to become dependents of their children or the society. Furthermore, many healthy retirees who could be very wise, mature and energetic, do possess valuable past working experience and are capable of making sound judgments. If this source of energy could be properly tapped, and put to good use, that might possibly result in the creation of even more job at the lower end, this group could continue to be a valuable asset to our community.

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