

## Local Women Discuss Aging, Plastic Surgery and Acceptance

By Jennifer Wake



Sandra Smith expresses her views on aging with other participants on Feb.7 at the Lafayette Community Center Photo Jennifer Wake

When Sandra Smith, who serves on the Lafayette Senior Services Commission, was 27 years old, she met an 80-year-old woman coming down from climbing Yosemite Falls. Smith has never forgotten the brief encounter with that vivacious, athletic woman. “She wasn’t old to me,” said Smith, a backpacker and avid hiker herself. “She was who I wanted to become.”

Smith was one of more than 65 women (and two men) who met at the Lafayette Community Center on Feb. 7 to discuss feelings about changes to our faces and bodies as we age. Discussion questions included how people deal with the messages in society to look a certain way, and how far we are willing to go to be attractive.

Susan Lucier of Orinda bravely told one of the small breakout groups that she had gone to a plastic surgeon six months ago for a consultation. “I have had a lot of sadness in my life over the last five years,” said Lucier, who is an attractive, fit woman who plays tennis and walks regularly. “When you go into the office, everyone is very young. I suddenly felt very old.”

A TV monitor sat on the doctor’s desk in his office, and at first Lucier didn’t recognize her own picture on the screen – her face with

no makeup, her hair pulled back in a headband. “I was dumbfounded,” she said. “I’m in the role of self-deception.”

With cosmetic surgeries and enhancements now widely available – and more socially accepted – the outward appearance of aging is changing. And expectations are changing with it.

According to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons there were 11 million cosmetic procedures conducted between 2004 and 2006, up 48 percent from 2000, and \$11.5 billion was spent on cosmetic procedures. From 2000 to 2006 there was a 420 percent increase in Botox injections.

“What kind of pressure is going to be put on those women, now 30, when they reach 40 or 50,” Lucier said. “We talk about the technological divide, but I wonder how divided our society will be by those who do [cosmetic enhancements] and those who don’t.”

Author and facilitator MJ Ryan said women face conflicting feelings about their appearance as they age in our society today. “My two best friends are 10 years older than me. When I was in my 40s, my two friends got face lifts in their 50s,” she said. “That kind of ambivalence is what this is all about.”

One woman, whose friend in her 70s recently got a face lift, came to get a grasp on the person she is behind her face. Another, who is a plastic surgery nurse, attended the discussion because she said, “I no longer recognize myself and I see girls in their 20s getting plastic surgery.”

“There is something in our culture that makes us want to be younger,” one attendee said. “Older people don’t really respect themselves.”

Lafayette Senior Services coordinator, Mei Sun Li, said the new source of discrimination is age. “As we get older, it’s harder to get around. The body is giving way and that’s a part of image as well,” she said. “We become invisible in the conscious of younger people.”

Smith, however, refuses to become invisible. “I’m still active, still doing things I’ve done before,” she said. “I’d like to think that those who don’t [do plastic surgery] probably have more confidence in themselves and radiate that confidence into the community.”

Three years ago, while on an eight-day backpacking trip in the Sierras with her husband, who was 72 at the time, Smith ran into two young men who didn’t see Smith and her husband as older, just as fellow hikers. “They asked us: Was the pass difficult? Can we make it over it?” she said. “I told them it was fine, and they were relieved because they said the ‘elderly woman’ who gave them their pass said it might be too tough. That ‘elderly woman’ was 50 years old.”

“Having strong role models is key,” she said. “When you meet people, you become a model for what is possible.”