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Newhouse: Singing a lovely song for the aging

By Dave Newhouse
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Nader Robert Shabahangi grew up in Germany, observing how Europeans treated the elderly. He's now involved with elder care in America, so he's in a position to make comparisons.

Well, America can't be first in everything.

"There's a reverence — a tremendous respect that comes with living a long life," Shabahangi said of Germany's culture. "My grandfather was the person I would come to for almost anything. I'd sit on his lap and ask him questions. The mullah sits on the throne."

Shabahangi, 52, the son of a German mother and Persian father, believes "the extended family" is more common in Europe than in America. Grandparents overseas live in their children's home or nearby.

"It's a bond," he said Thursday. "That's more the norm."

In America, that would be abnormal. Mullahs don't sit on thrones. Grandparents often are shunted off to care facilities to blow out the candles on their last remaining birthdays.

"The American view," said Shabahangi, "is that, in a youth-oriented culture, once you reach a certain age, or certain look, you're not as useful anymore, and you become a liability instead of a resource."

He believes what he witnessed in Germany is

prevalent throughout Europe. A friend of his in Warsaw, Poland, visits his mother daily for three hours, from 4 to 7 p.m., after he finishes work and before he goes home to his own family.

"That's his routine," said Shabahangi, "with a mom that he didn't, necessarily, have the closest relationship to. The kind of respect is common (in Europe) as a continuity."

The comparison between what he saw in Germany and what he's seen in the U.S. explains why Shabahangi, in 1995, founded AgeSong, an innovative approach to elder care with two sites in Oakland — an independent-living community at the Lake Merritt Hotel and an assisted-living facility at Lakeside Park. Two more assisted-living facilities are in San Francisco, with two more planned for San Francisco and Emeryville.

Shabahangi resists calling his AgeSong sites "care centers." He prefers "communities."

Instead of emphasizing the medical approach to elder care, he approaches it from the humanistic angle, i.e., trying to tap into a person's intelligence and experience.

"What does he have to teach me?" he said. "It's not aging, it's maturing."

Shabahangi spent 20 years in Germany before seeking an education in America. He picked up a bachelor's degree at San Francisco State, then a master's and a doctorate at Stanford with the intention of becoming a "white-coated scientist in a research lab."

He had just completed his doctoral dissertation in 1994 — the finish line after a 16-year college run — when a couple called him to come look at their senior home, to help them enlarge it. He first

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investigated a larger care facility in order to gain some perspective.

"I was horrified," he said. "It was dark, not respectful. It was a mindless activity that was more about keeping you busy rather than wanting you to learn. I was thinking of my grandfather, and I was shocked."

A year later, AgeSong was formed. A friend's wife, Elizabeth Bugental, conceived of the lovely name. Shabahangi oversees a company that has adopted a holistic approach to aging.

"We want to celebrate aging — to sing about aging," he said. "Our philosophy is 'I can't wait to get old.'"

Instead of "dementia," he uses "forgetfulness." He has written three books on aging; the third book, "Conversations With Ed," about someone with "forgetfulness," will be published this fall.

Of course, Europe isn't perfect in embracing the aging, and America isn't exactly backwoods. My mother received excellent care-home attention before she died last month at 97. But there's always room for improvement — everywhere.

"We have a tremendous opportunity to create a different world," said Shabahangi, "and a different world we must create."

Dave Newhouse's columns appear Mondays, Thursdays and Sundays, usually on the Metro page. Know any Good Neighbors? Phone 510-208-6466 or e-mail dnewhouse@bayareanewsgroup.com.

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