

HOST LEDE:

Californians are increasingly working well into their golden years. About 1 in 5 Californians 65 and older have jobs.

Some need the paycheck. But others just *want* to keep working.

As part of our “Graying California” series, KPCC's David Wagner introduces us to one of them.

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GEORGE: I did want to go over the syllabus one more time.

George Shannon is a professor of gerontology at USC.

He's opening today's lecture with a provocative question.

GEORGE: Should older people be protected from bad choices? What does that mean?

One student says older people might need help with decisions around money.

GEORGE: Okay. Stephen said financial. You know, financial management, right?

George is 79.

He welcomes students into the discussion with his calm demeanor and reassuring voice.

GEORGE: Uh-huh. In other words staying at home too long without care.

If it sounds like the voice of a debonair soap opera star...

AMBI music

That's because it was.

GEORGE: Would you like to be my date tonight at a black tie dinner?

That's him in 1990, on NBC's daytime soap "Generations."

George used to be a professional actor.

He starred in a French surrealist film, he did theater, and he narrated lots and lots of commercials.

AMBI Cadillac music comes up

GEORGE: And I got the the entire Cadillac account in 1988 by saying...

AMBI music

GEORGE: New for 1988: The Cadillac Eldorado

Fade music out

GEORGE: I thought, I'm never going to get that. I just threw the line away. And I got the job. I was amazed.

But George says by his 50s, doing commercials was getting boring.

He was going through something gerontologists call "generativity" — sort of like a mid-life crisis.

GEORGE: When you get to be 45, 55, and you look at your life and you say, 'What have I done that's meaningful?' You know, I've done a lot of commercials, I've done a lot of soaps and a few films. Is that what it's all about? Is that what I wanted to do? No, I wanted to do more.

So, George went back to school as a 55-year-old undergrad.

He stayed to get his PhD. And he eventually became a professor.

GEORGE: I have to prepare. And I have to push myself. And that really stimulates me and keeps me going.

His acting skills still come in handy.

George says teaching is a lot like improv — you have to think on your feet.

Teaching also keeps him social and gives him purpose.

GEORGE: There are times when I might say, ‘Oh God, I don’t feel like going into the office today,’ and I think to myself, ‘You’re so damn lucky to have an office to go to, to be in demand and be doing something that you like and that pays you pretty well. Get your butt into the office!’

GRAD STUDENT: Do you want us to move into the methodology part?

George runs a lab at USC.

GEORGE: I think we better. I think we can knock this down rather quickly.

He likes collaborating with his younger colleagues.

But putting off retirement can lead to tension in some workplaces.

Younger academics can feel like older professors aren’t making room for them.

GEORGE: Of course I think about it, of course. And I recognize that it’s really not true. What is true is that having more people in the workplace presents more opportunities.

There is research backing him up — showing that older workers are generally not crowding out younger ones.

George says he’s healthy, capable and contributing to the economy.

GEORGE: And who the hell wants to retire? People ask me if I want to retire. I don’t want to retire. Why would I retire? I’m enjoying what I’m doing.

In Los Angeles, I’m David Wagner.