



50+ Living our best lives now and in the future!

A Gerontologist with a Vision-Inspired Mission

Environmental (ECO) Gerontologist Monica

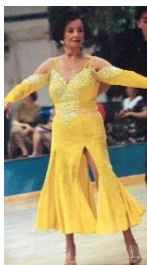


Eastway, M.S., is the creator and founder of Eco-Generation Park, a model that brings people together in caring farming communities; it is "elder-centered, intergenerational, and resident-sustained." Eastway's mission is to "raise awareness and inspire all

ages to bring care outdoors and grow nature-connectedness."

The Influence of a Great Grandmother

Three great-grandmothers—and one, in particular, named Tess—influenced how a younger Monica viewed Aging. "Tess started ballroom dancing in her early 70s...and taught me there is always time to embrace a passion, no matter our age."



Eastway remembers Tess as her best friend. She recalled when this then-vibrant 80-year-old woman picked her up at a bus station one cold December morning. Tess was "driving her purple Oldsmobile and was wearing her mink coat."

Later that evening, the two dressed in sequin clothes, sang karaoke, and went to dance showcases.

Separated from Joy and Meaning

Even to this day, Eastway can still hear her great-grandmother's emotional pleas the day a social worker told her that a hospital-based skilled nursing facility was her only option. "Tess was placed on the sixth floor without access to the outdoors, natural sunlight, gardens, her dog, and children—everything that brought her life meaning and joy."

A Challenge: The Need for a New Model of Care

In 2017, Eastway spent a year as an activity director in an assisted living/memory care 'community.' Based on her observations and research, Eastway suggests many of the care options for older adults still separate residents from the natural world and are seriously lacking in other ways. "Our current system of residential care facilities—including nursing homes, skilled, assisted, and memory care—is outdated, dangerous, and even inhumane." For example, she observed that long-time residents who could no longer afford the high out-of-pocket costs for rent where she was employed were often evicted. She also became familiar with other traditionally

operated senior care facilities. "I was deeply disheartened to see that profit is prioritized over people in almost every care facility I encountered."

Having experienced a nature-centered "live-work-learn" community a few years earlier, Eastway "often imagined how much happier, vibrant, and engaged residents and staff would be" if they were living in care communities based on this type of model—a model "that does not evict you and where you can earn a dignified income while sharing your unique talents."

Researching a Healthier Care Model

Eastway began her graduate studies in environmental gerontology to explore healthier, evidence-based care models and to develop a new model. Green Care Farms is a European model growing in popularity outside the United States.

"Green Care Farms began popping up in the Netherlands in the 1990s as an innovative way to make farms multifunctional and financially sustainable." These farms support people with various "social and medical needs" and ages. "Daily activities occur in a community kitchen, gardens, stables, and the farmyard—promoting a sense of contribution while optimizing physical and cognitive wellbeing. Research has shown that people living in green care farms are more socially engaged and more active."

Unlike conventional farming approaches "with its emphasis on yields rather than nutrition that has led to increased rates of 'hidden hunger,' diabetes, and obesity," Green Care Farms members "enjoy a nutrient-rich diet, often requiring less medication."

Eco Generation Park: An Innovative Model for Our Time

While similar to Green Care Farms in many ways, Eastway's model is "like a naturally occurring neighborhood. Intergenerational living, learning, and working bring together people of different ages and create a diverse community with various

experiences and perspectives. The exchange of knowledge and support can enrich everyone's lives, inspiring a strong sense of community where everyone feels valued and connected."

The Eco Park model not only benefits participants but also helps encourage responsible environmental behaviors. "Research has shown that nature-connectedness promotes pro-environmental behavior leading to a greater emphasis on conservation, restoration, and nurturing the biodiversity of our landscapes...we are living in extraordinary times of rapid change; however, these times offer a new way forward, a new way of 'being in our world, a new way of being that is in harmony with nature."

A Vision Becoming a Reality

"We are on course to break ground with the pilot community by the end of 2024. This community will be in the Mendocino County coastal farm region. Once the pilot community is sustainable, our mission is to social-franchise eco parks (green care farms) across the nation."



Eastway offers online courses designed as two-day retreats and other enrichment [opportunities](#). To learn more about the park and the [vision](#) that inspired this work, visit the Eco Generation Park [website](#).

Just for Relaxation

"I love to relax! I enjoy mini breaks throughout the day to 'sit and be.' In the spirit of Thich Nhat Hahn, 'Don't just do something, sit there.' Nature-movement breaks are also vital for my relaxation."

Advice for Others to Live Their Best Lives

"Enjoy moments to breathe deep and be thankful for every day we are gifted. To age is a gift, one we should not take for granted."

What are We Missing?

The [EPA](#) reveals that, "Americans, on average, spend approximately 90 percent of their time indoors, where the concentrations of some pollutants are often 2 to 5 times higher than typical outdoor concentrations."

Nature: A Potent Prescription

[The Lancet](#), a medical Journal, reported that "access to green spaces, such as forests, parks, grasslands, recreational areas, and blue spaces, such as rivers, oceans, seas, and lakes, improve health and wellbeing." Spending time in nature offers numerous [benefits](#) for older adults, including "feelings of calmness, improved attention, lower blood pressure and decreased risk of heart disease." According to the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, older adults with cognitive diseases may [decrease first-time hospitalizations](#) if they live near green spaces, bodies of water, and parks.



For those living in urban areas, a Finnish study, summarized in a recent [article](#), reveals that spending time outside in green spaces also has health benefits. "Scientists found frequent visits to urban green spaces may be linked to lower use of certain prescription meds" such as those used for depression, anxiety, insomnia, high blood pressure, and asthma."

Grandparents Academy

"Founded in 2011 by Aaron Larsen as a way to honor his grandparents, [Grandparents Academy](#) is the world's first and only online academy dedicated to helping grandparents grow meaningful relationships and rich legacies with their loved ones."



Grandparents Academy offers free, downloadable eBooks such as *The Secret to Entering Your Grandchild's World*. The Academy also provides reasonably priced online courses taught by "world-class instructors." The Spring 2023 [Course Catalog](#) includes 14 classes ranging from Preserving & Sharing Your Family History to Alienated Grands. Some of the course offerings are categorized for new grandparents, those with grandkids 2-12, and grandkids 12+.

Check out [Grandparents Academy](#) for additional resources and information.

Grandparents and Grandchildren: A Mutually Enriching Relationship

Writing for [USU Extension](#), Assistant Professor



Christina Pay notes that "Grandparents provide acceptance, patience, love, stability, wisdom, fun and support for grandchildren" positively affecting a child's wellbeing. Pay reports that for grandparents, a close relationship with grandchildren may "boost brain function, protect against depression, and increase lifespan."

For adults 55+ who have no grandchildren, some mutual benefits may be enjoyed through foster grandparent programs. School-based [volunteer programs](#) can also offer enrichment and connections between younger and older adults.

Chronic Stress and Heart Disease

A study in the [International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health](#), exercise may help reduce chronic stress associated with cardiovascular disease.

Remember to check with your healthcare provider before starting a new exercise program.

Show a Little Love: It's Heart Month

February is American Heart Month, and it is an



opportunity for all of us to pause and evaluate our cardiovascular risks and then make healthy changes, as appropriate.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([CDC](#)) reports that "about 697,000 people die of heart disease in the United States every year—that's 1 in every 5 deaths." Heart disease is the number one cause of death in the United States.

In another [report](#), the CDC claims the "leading risk factors for heart disease and stroke are high blood pressure, high LDL cholesterol, diabetes, smoking, obesity, an unhealthy diet, and physical inactivity."

To reduce our risks, the [Mayo Clinic](#) recommends not smoking, aiming for at least 30 to 60 minutes of activity each day, maintaining a healthy weight, getting enough sleep, managing stress, getting regular check-ups, and eating a heart-healthy diet. A heart-healthy diet can include vegetables, fruits, beans or other legumes, lean meats and fish, low-fat dairy foods, whole grains, and healthy fats, such as olive oil.



If interested in valuable resources for better heart health, visit:

<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/education/american-heart-month>

What Happened to Real Food?

Last month, I took a free online nutrition course on [Coursera](#) (with a certificate option for \$49). I did learn some new information, and what I had previously learned was reinforced. The discussion on ultra-processed foods—foods heavy in added sugars, salt, fats, stabilizers, hydrogenated fats, and various artificial ingredients was especially

interesting. All these additives and extra processing can extend the shelf life and appeal to our cravings—especially sugar, salt, and fat cravings.

Shortly after finishing my nutrition course, I needed to make a quick trip to the local grocery store. I had some increased awareness about how much of the 'food' sold in that store was ultra-processed and located



in the center aisles and at the front of the store. I noticed rows of colorful packaging designed to move items from shelves into carts.

The produce section and a small fresh meat section—where real food spoils quickly—were located on the sides of the store.

Cited by Harvard Health and reported in [BMJ](#), "ultra-processed foods are the main source (nearly 58%) of calories eaten in the U.S., and contribute almost 90% of the energy we get from added sugars." These ultra-processed foods may look appealing and taste good, but our high consumption "is [associated](#) with obesity and heart disease." There's also mounting evidence linking these foods to other chronic diseases.

I'll admit that I still like a slice or two of pizza once in a while or a little instant whipped cream on my hot chocolate. But I am making a concerted effort to reduce the percentage of ultra-processed foods that I purchase, serve, or consume. Perhaps by making some adjustments, we could collectively send a message to manufacturers and advertisers who might otherwise be more than willing to continue creating and promoting whatever we will buy—even if it is killing us.

Paula Marie Usrey

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