



January 2012 WYPR Commentary by Kirby Fowler
President of Downtown Partnership of Baltimore

SLACKERS ARE SAVING OUR CITIES

In the 1989 movie, “Say Anything,” John Cusack’s character, Lloyd Dobler, sums up the feelings of a generation when he said, “If you start out depressed, everything’s kind of a pleasant surprise.”

The quote, and the movie, stand out as cultural identifiers for the generation born between 1965 and 1980 – better known as Generation X.

Time Magazine hailed this group of 46 million people as “the Ignored Generation” because it lives in the shadow of 80 million Baby Boomers and, more recently, 78 million Millennials.

Gen Xers grew up as the divorce rate and number of single-parent households began to rise. They remember the Cold War and writing term papers on a typewriter. They were buffeted by economic boom-and-bust cycles and graduated with crushing debt. No wonder Lloyd Dobler was depressed.

But several studies uncover pleasant surprises about Gen Xers. According to the Center for Work-Life Policy, they enrolled in higher education in record numbers, and Gen X graduates are culturally and racially diverse. Gen X women are the first to be as engaged professionally as men, and 36% are more likely to out-earn their male spouses. And, because Gen-X husbands share many family responsibilities, Gen-X women are more likely to re-enter the workforce and re-energize our Downtown workplaces.

Despite a reputation for slacking, Gen Xers are hard-working and resilient. They are tech savvy, culturally adventurous, and value community over short-term self-interest. They don’t have as many kids, but two-thirds of them are married and their divorce rate is much lower than Baby Boomers’.

These values were shaped by difficult experiences to be sure, but also by multi-cultural references from “Sesame Street” to “Fat Albert” to hip hop.

Which leads to one last point about Gen Xers... they are the first generation in a century to prefer city living in large numbers. This makes sense since their icons were urban – think “Friends” or “In Living Color,” not “Leave it to Beaver.”

Here in Baltimore, Gen Xers remember Dollar Houses and the opening of Harborplace. They momentarily escaped suburban ennui at the city’s underground clubs, or went to college in the city. Many lived here all along and could not imagine it any other way.

The founders of LiveBaltimore, Station North Arts District, and the Downtown Family Alliance are Gen Xers. So are the people behind Under Armour. Mayor Stephanie Rawlings Blake is a Gen Xer, as are many of the teachers, entrepreneurs, chefs, and artists that make Baltimore neighborhoods so dynamic.

As a Gen Xer myself, I like to think the work my generation has done to improve cities paved the way for retiring Baby Boomers and the Millennials, who are all helping to inject new life into our cities.

This rebirth of cities is a global trend and it’s worth celebrating. So, in the immortal words of one 80s hit song, “Everybody have fun tonight. Everybody Wang Chung tonight.”

This is Kirby Fowler, President of Downtown Partnership of Baltimore, for 88-1 WYPR, your NPR news station.