



## Senior Arts Programs for Better Health

Jennifer Maybin

When we think about arts programming, we usually think about promoting painting and music classes for school-aged children in our public schools. But what about people on the opposite end of the age continuum? Seniors have vast experiences and a lifetime spent appreciating or even participating in drawing, painting, writing, dance, theater, music, and other arts. Yet for many, especially those in assisted living (AL) facilities or other long-term care environments, continued access to the arts may be limited or not encouraged.

The National Center for Creative Aging (NCCA; [www.creativeaging.org/](http://www.creativeaging.org/)) is a Washington, DC-based organization “dedicated to fostering an understanding of the vital relationship between creative expression and the quality of life of older people.” Together with the National Guild of Community Schools for the Arts and the New Jersey Performing Arts Center (NJPAC), NCCA developed *Creativity Matters: The Arts and Aging Toolkit*, for healthcare and aging services professionals who are interested in developing arts programs for older adults. The resource is available online at [www.artsandaging.org/](http://www.artsandaging.org/). A print copy can also be ordered.

The importance of *participatory* arts programs for healthy aging has been proven in numerous research studies. The 2-year Creativity and Aging Study conducted by investigators at George Washington University’s Center on Aging, Health & Humanities, demonstrated that study participants who were involved in singing, creative writing, poetry, painting, or jewelry had fewer falls, better scores on depression and loneliness scales, and lower levels of prescription drug use than those who did not participate in art programs.<sup>1</sup> Duke University researchers have found evidence that mental activity, including artistic expression, stimulates brain cell growth in the cerebral cortex.<sup>2</sup> And re-

### Mitch Miller Anyone?

Activities for Living Well that incorporate the arts don’t always have to be “artsy” to be successful. They don’t have to be expensive or complex, but they do require an openness to explore, to be inventive, and to invite free expression.

Most assisted living (AL) communities have a piano in a common area. Often it’s a “player piano,” and in most cases it’s used as soothing background “musak,” programmed to play classical music on Sunday afternoons. That’s nice, but rarely does it command an audience, and the participation is passive.

A creative arts program might engage a local music school, theatre company, or piano instructor to visit the community on a regular basis, perhaps once each month. The idea is not so much to entertain the residents, but rather to engage them. Find a piano player who loves show tunes, ask him or her to bring sheet music geared for “sing along,” and encourage the residents to sit near the piano and sing. The first or second “sing-alongs” may be somewhat reserved, but once the residents are comfortable singing out, they will look forward to these simple inventive evenings and they will participate. There is no heavy lifting involved, no arthritic limitations to overcome, and no skill required. To participate, you don’t even have to be able to hold a tune.

The key to this kind of an event is a live piano player, group participation, and not a great deal of scheduling and control. The same piano that “played” by itself as residents strolled by becomes a focal point when a real person puts his or her fingers to the keys.

Another program might involve partnering with a local school to become the “dress rehearsal” stage for school performances. Drama clubs, choral groups, and music recitals involving children are rewarding and engaging for all concerned. Again, very little expense, a bit of creative coordination, and a whole lot of “living well.”

### Remember—We want to hear from YOU!

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searchers at Columbia University showed that seniors older than 65 who participate in arts programs are more autonomous and independent.<sup>3</sup>

Authored by Johanna Misesy Boyer, the NCCA *Toolkit* provides an introduction to the community arts education infrastructure; best practices in designing, funding, implementing, sustaining, and evaluating participatory arts programs for older adults; exemplary programs; and resources. For example, in designing an arts program for older adults, facilitators must determine the self-identified needs of the senior participants, create

goals that meet those needs, and develop participatory programs that are geared to the possible cognitive and physical limitations of participants. The *Toolkit* strongly suggests that a well-developed senior arts program enlist the skills of a “professional teaching artist.”

Some goals for an arts program that are suggested in the *Toolkit* are the following<sup>1</sup>:

- Seniors have a sense of autonomy and feel empowered.
- Seniors are socially engaged.
- Seniors exercise their bodies and minds.
- Seniors have reduced risk factors for disease and disability.
- Senior have a zest for life and a positive attitude.
- Seniors express themselves creatively.

The *Toolkit* also provides information on partnering with community organizations to develop a senior arts programs. For example, OASIS ([www.oasisnet.org/index.htm](http://www.oasisnet.org/index.htm)) is a national nonprofit educational organization designed to enhance the quality of life for mature adults. OASIS, or other similar organizations, may be interested in collaborating with your facility to develop arts projects. Other organizations to consider are community schools of the arts, theater groups, art galleries, museums, historical societies, arts centers, dance companies and studios, choral groups, local musicians’ unions, orchestra or chamber groups, churches and other places of worship, YMCAs and YWCAs, schools, and universities or colleges.

One successful program featured in the *Toolkit* is the Golden Tones ([www.goldentones.org](http://www.goldentones.org)), a 60-person elder chorus founded by professional singer Maddie Sifantus in 1988 and located in Massachusetts. Another program geared specifically for elders with dementia is the Dancing Heart program developed by artist Maria Genné of the Kairos Dance Theatre ([www.kairosdance.org](http://www.kairosdance.org)), a community arts organization in Minneapolis. Genné leads 12 to 17 AL or nursing home residents in a 90-minute “dance,” singing, and storytelling program once a week at the residence. Seated in a circle of chairs, residents move their arms in time to music played on a CD player or by a live older musician. The AL facility is



Maria Genné (right) working with elders in the The Dancing Heart program, part of the Kairos Dance Theatre.

asked to cover 50% of the cost, provide 15 to 30 minutes of staff time after the sessions for follow-up, enable staff to participate in training, and allocate a staff member to assist during the 90-minute program.

Many more examples of quality programs are described in the *Toolkit*, and numerous resources and references are provided. AL facilities looking to provide more meaningful arts programs to residents—that can also enhance health and overall well-being—can read more about the *Toolkit* at <http://artsandaging.org/index.php>.

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## References

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2. Cabeza R, Nyberg L, Park D, eds. *Cognitive Neuroscience of Aging*. London: Oxford University Press; 2005.
3. Jeffri J. *Above Ground: Information on Artists III Special Focus New York City Aging Artists*. Teachers College Columbia University, Research Center for Arts and Culture Web site. <http://www.tc.edu/rcac/>. December 2007. Accessed May 6, 2008.
4. Boyer JM. *Creativity Matters: The Arts and Aging Toolkit*. New York: National Guild of Community Schools of the Arts; 2007.

I’m very pleased with each advancing year. It stems back to when I was forty. I was a bit upset about reaching that milestone, but an older friend consoled me. ‘Don’t complain about growing old... many, many people do not have that privilege’

– Chief Justice Earl Warren