

Creative Expression and Quality of Life: A Vital Relationship for Elders

By Susan Perlstein, *guest editor*

Creativity has always been at the heart of our experience as human beings. Throughout the lifespan, creativity is our partner as we adapt to new environments, cope with life itself, and express ourselves along the way. This need for creativity never ends: We continue to encounter new places and experience fresh challenges, and we constantly need to express ourselves.

For decades, American culture neglected to recognize this innate creativity in elders, who were too often viewed as debilitated and in need of medical attention. But in the past five years, this attitude has shifted dramatically toward an understanding of aging as a natural process that comes with not only its own set of problems but also unique strengths. We are looking more closely at these strengths and discovering new ways to celebrate them. For example, the American Society on Aging has committed to this approach in its new strategic plan.

The relatively new field of creativity and aging has laid the foundation for the arts to play a major role in how we understand and experience aging going forward. There is a vital relationship between creative expression and the quality of life of older people and their communities.

In 1998, the National Endowment for the Arts asked Elders Share the Arts, a nonprofit

Introduction

organization in Brooklyn, New York, to research arts programs for older people throughout the country. That initiative led to the creation of the National Center for Creative Aging, which was formally established in 2001. The center fosters an understanding of the vital relationship between creative expression and the quality of life of older people.

In this issue of *Generations*, we present the views of a diverse group of leaders in the field—arts program directors, healthcare professionals, artists, writers, and policy makers—all of whom are opening up the world of creativity to elders. We begin our journey with Gene Cohen, whose research serves as a foundation for this issue—and in many ways for the field at large. He provides details about his path-breaking study—the first national longitudinal study of its kind to measure the impact of cultural programs on the health and well-being of older adults. Preliminary results indicate that those who participate in such programs experience better overall health and quality of life. At last, we have evidence-based research for what we often sensed to be true—that creativity matters!

We then take a look at how the arts are flourishing in healthcare. Anne Davis Basting, creator of the TimeSlips process, discusses arts in the care of older adults with dementia. Raquel

Chapin Stephenson, an art therapist, and the artist Jaime Permuth provide two perspectives on arts programs for older adults, showing how these programs are valuable in different ways. And in an article by Pamela Braverman Schmidt, we see how famous artists like Georgia O’Keeffe and Claude Monet serve as prime examples of the power of creative aging.

In the area of arts and vital aging, we consider how creative aging encourages relationships between generations and builds community, in addition to facilitating creative expression. For centuries, older folk artists have served as keepers of culture, passing on to younger generations cultural traditions with their stories and arts and crafts, from quilting to carving. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Mary Hufford, Marjorie Hunt, and Steve Zeitlin provide their view on elders as repositories and creators of culture. Renya Larson examines how intergenerational programs are helping elders pass on culture and generate community at the same time.

One of the most developed areas within the scope of creative aging is lifelong learning through the arts. For years, organizations like Elderhostel and Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes have engaged older adults through classes focused on various art forms. In this issue, Andrea Sherman, project director of New York Geriatric Education Centers at New York University, discusses the role of the arts in lifelong learning. She also looks at the work of several programs throughout the country that incorporate the arts in learning opportunities for older adults.

With all of the creative aging activity in the field, we are also coming together to advocate public support. In the area of policy, arts, and aging, Janice Blanchard of the Society of Certified Senior Advisors has been at the forefront of the policy work related to arts and aging and provides a historical review of how policy in this area has evolved.

Most recently, creative aging professionals convened at a mini-conference in May 2005 to make recommendations to the White House

Conference on Aging (WHCOA) in December 2005. Gay Hanna, executive director of the Society for the Arts in Healthcare, outlines those recommendations in three areas: arts in healthcare, universal design, and lifelong learning and community.

WHCOA Resolution 58, “Increase Awareness of the Positive Physical and Psychological Impact that Arts Participation Can Have on Older Americans,” grew out of the efforts at the mini-conference. The ultimate goal was to win delegate support for a new stream of federal funding dedicated to arts and aging programming. While Resolution 58 was not adopted in its original form, another resolution was expanded to address the issue. The arts were included in a resolution on civic engagement that addressed the need for intergenerational arts programs and in the long-term-care proposals.

Finally, in this issue, we shine the spotlight on four successful creative aging programs: Elders Share the Arts, Consortium for Elders and Youth in the Arts, StageBridge, and the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange. We hope you will learn from their approaches and experiences working in the field of arts and aging.

This issue of *Generations* documents an important moment in time for the field of creative aging that could well be a turning point. We are at the beginning of organizing and understanding who we are as a field, what we have accomplished, and what we would like to achieve in the future. We will continue these efforts at a summit conference on arts and aging presented by the National Center for Creative Aging this fall. Creative aging professionals, including every writer in this issue of *Generations*, will join us at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center, November 3–4, 2006, to learn from each other and advance our efforts together.

We hope you will join us as we work to improve the quality of life of elders and their communities through the arts. ☪

Susan Perlstein is executive director, Elders Share the Arts, Brooklyn, New York.