

# Our Guest Editor

The surprising effects that the arts can have in the lives of older people are compellingly presented by this issue's lineup of authors from the field of aging and from the arts, from health-care and public policy. The growing appreciation of this potential—and the collaboration of diverse groups now coming together to develop and strengthen arts programs for elders—are in no small part a result of the tireless work of our guest editor, Susan Perlstein.

Susan Perlstein is the founder and executive director of the National Center for Creative Aging/Elders Share the Arts. She is also an artist, teacher, social worker, and activist who has devoted her career to promoting community arts, first in New York, then across the country, with a particular focus on aging.

"I was trained as a dancer with the Martha Graham Company, studied modern dance, and always knew the arts would be part of my life," Perlstein says. "But I really am that rare person who was born a gerontologist." Perlstein also attributes this calling to her relationship with her grandparents: "From them I received the values of love and trust and a sense that we are our story. I always knew I must carry their story forward."

Since its founding in 1979, Perlstein's Elders Share the Arts has fostered the traditional role of elders as the bearers of history and culture by using the arts to transmit their stories and life experiences in the myriad communities throughout New York City. The organization began as a street theater company and then combined performing arts with visual arts and writing, with people of all ages. It is now widely known for its "Living History Arts" programs, a synthesis of reminiscence, oral history, and the creative arts presented by elders, which have been replicated across the country. In 1999, the organization received a United Nations Year of



SUSAN PERLSTEIN

the Older Person Award for Best Practice in Aging Programs.

Perlstein has spoken and written widely about aging and the arts, and is a leading advocate for sustainable funding. To show the effectiveness of arts in improving elders' lives, she established the database on which Gene Cohen's path-breaking study of arts and health and well-being of elders is based. She recently played a prominent role in support of the arts at the White House Conference on Aging and in ensuring that the value of arts programs was affirmed in the Older Americans Act.

Perlstein currently devotes much of her time to the work of the National Center for Creative Aging, which serves as an advocacy, education, and resource hub for the emerging field of "creative aging." The center has trained thousands of healthcare and social service professionals and artists in working with elders and arts and is currently conducting a three-year national public awareness campaign, "Art of Aging: Creativity Matters."

"It is a joy to see the climate changing," Perlstein says. "Now arts are on the front burner in aging, with programs burgeoning in the community and in care settings like nursing homes. We still must press for quality programs and for sustainability. But now people in aging and in the arts are getting together, forming partnerships to tap the potential of the arts to improve the quality of later life in many ways." ❧

—Mary Johnson