

INTERGENERATIONAL CREATIVE AGING

By Ellen Hirzy

Enthusiasm for the creative aging movement is booming. Programs that engage the creativity of adults 55 and older are increasingly popular in community arts education organizations, as independent efforts and as community partnerships. This year, the National Guild and Aroha Philanthropies launched Building a Creative Aging Movement, a multi-pronged effort to advance this emerging field. “There’s a shift in awareness about the value of including older adults,” says Annie Montgomery, director of education at Lifetime Arts, a nonprofit that supports creative aging capacity building and a Guild partner in the new initiative. As people live more active, longer, healthier lives, the demand will only increase.

There’s another dimension to creative aging that organizations are beginning to explore: intergenerational programs that invite older and younger students to learn from each other while making art together. A workshop on intergenerational arts learning at the 2018 National Conference for Community Arts Education, led by Montgomery and Matthew Cumbie, associate artistic director of Dance Exchange in Takoma Park, Maryland, drew enthusiastic participants who were eager to find out more. “We tend to have preconceived ideas about what it means to age,” Montgomery says, “but when we learn to see things differently, the possibilities are exciting.”

Research supports the need for intergenerational ventures. A 2017 survey about age segregation by Generations United and the Eisner Foundation found that outside their families, most people rarely spend time with others who are much younger or much older. But most older adults would like more interaction with younger people, and nearly all believe that these relationships benefit everyone. Age segregation can foster ageism and a tendency to focus on generational conflict—baby boomers failing to make way for younger people in the workforce, for example—when we could be creating

more opportunities for deeper connections.

Intergenerational arts learning can encourage those connections. An intergenerational program “covers the full lifespan by involving age groups where there’s a significant divide—older adults and teens, or 20-year-olds, or preschoolers,” Montgomery says. It’s a collaborative process of dialogue and exchange, unlike programs where younger students learn from older adults who take the lead or where generations have separate experiences and join in a culminating performance or exhibit.

How Students Benefit

An intergenerational approach to arts learning has a positive impact on students of all ages—breaking down stereotypes, building empathy and understanding, and nurturing community. Both age groups discover their commonalities, appreciate their differences, and learn to value what others bring to the experience. When young and older students work together, they tend to put their biases aside. Teens, for example, embrace the wealth of experience their elders bring to the creative process, while older adults shed their assumption that teens will be unruly or disrespectful.

“You’re both taking risks as learners when making art, and you see each other not as ‘the other,’ but as fellow humans on a journey,” Montgomery says. “The arts learning can be very profound.”

Other benefits are unique to age. Sharing knowledge and experience through art making is gratifying for older adults. Some discover that interacting with young people helps combat their isolation and loneliness. Children and youth benefit from the involvement of adults as mentors. They also learn firsthand that creativity can be a lifelong source of growth, stimulation, and joy.

Rewards for Organizations

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that bridges generations, deepens equity and inclusion, and promotes anti-ageist values. Embracing intergenerational arts learning can expand notions of who your audience is and how you engage them in learning. Montgomery observes that when we step away from the deficit approach to aging—adapting for mobility needs, hearing problems, and other issues—“we can begin to think about older adults differently. That is eye opening. When those assumptions are blown out of the water, it’s really exciting to think about the possibilities.” Cumbie agrees. An intergenerational perspective “can open up a whole new way of thinking about how your organization can benefit the people in your community by giving them opportunities to work and learn with one another,” he says. “Intergenerational work is not one sided. It’s about relationship building.”

2018 Conference for Community Arts Education



Program Development Tips

Challenge ageist attitudes and behaviors.

Establish that aging as an asset, not a deficit. Be candid about staff biases, and be prepared to encounter them among students, too. Creative aging programs are not just for older adults with physical or cognitive disabilities. Many serve an active, engaged audience.

Learn to share space and authority with students of all ages.

Eli Burke of the Museum of Contemporary Art Tucson says his staff focuses on “listening to the needs of participants, rather than telling them what they need. We work hard to make sure we support their ideas and give them the space and resources to tell their stories in their own unique ways.”

Look for community partners and connections.

Pursue creative aging partnerships to offer programs in senior living communities, senior centers, libraries, or other organizations. Begin with a pilot program that creates a demand and shows the positive benefits.

Find built-in audiences for intergenerational programs.

Your organization may already serve people of all ages. Explore ways to bring them together in a regular class or program or a one-time workshop that could expand into something permanent.

Intergenerational Arts Learning Snapshots

School One, a high school in Providence, RI, offers an intergenerational arts program—funded by Aroha Philanthropies and the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts—that links students and older adults from the community in mutually beneficial programming. Regular book clubs and nine-week classes feature storytelling, performance, artmaking, and discussion. In a recent class called Working Stories, students shared spoken and written stories about their experiences at different parts of the lifespan. Both age groups valued the collaborative creative process and the opportunity to know and understand each other. With learning as the generational bridge, younger students absorbed the wisdom of older students, who in turn say the teens help them stay young. [Learn more about School One's intergenerational programs.](#)

Musical theater students at **St. Paul Conservatory for Performing Arts**, a public charter high school in St. Paul, MN, collaborate with older adults in an intergenerational semester-long elective course that culminates in a performance before an audience. Teaching artist and department chair Joey Clark designed the course, now in its fifth year, as a partnership with Episcopal Homes senior living facilities. As a naturally collaborative art form, theater is an ideal way to bridge generations. Clark describes the experience as “by far the most rewarding work I have ever done—as a teacher, as an artist, and as a human being.” Older adults tell him that their creative work with teens “has literally changed their lives and perspectives in terms of their hopes for the future of this world.” [Learn more about St. Paul Conservatory for Performing Artists Intergenerational Musical Theater.](#)

Over nearly four decades, the Washington, DC-area organization **Dance Exchange** has been a leader in intergenerational learning. Its performances, classes, convenings, residencies, professional training, and national and international collaborative projects are infused with a cross-generational perspective. At the 2018 Conference for Community Arts Education, associate artistic director Matthew Cumbie performed an intergenerational piece called Journey with Thomas Dwyer, 84. He says working with Dwyer—who began dancing when he was in his 50s—changed his perception of what older adults can do and, even more, what dance can look like. “This is the kind of life-changing experience organizations should be seeking in intergenerational work.” Learn more about Dance Exchange at www.danceexchange.org.

At the **Museum of Contemporary Art Tucson**, a successful program for LGBTQIA+ teens and adults called Stay Gold led to another: School of Drag, a 10-week workshop that explores identity, art, and performance and culminates in a performance showcase. Funded through Aroha Philanthropies' Vitality Arts initiative, School of Drag is developed in collaboration with community members and organizations involved in gender performance. Education director Eli Burke says the generational mix creates a profound experience: “Youth can gain a better understanding and appreciation for all the ways in which they are able to exist and express themselves because of the risks our LGBTQIA+ elders have taken, while elders can gain a deeper awareness of how youth are carrying on that legacy and building on the work they have done while also supporting and encouraging them.” Learn more about MOCA-Tucson's programs in [this article by Eli Burke.](#)