

## Arts and Creative Aging Across America

By Susan Perlstein

*When an old person dies, it's like a library goes up in flames. —Unknown*

One of the characteristics of humankind is that we tell stories. As we age, we transform our experiences into memories that ground us in history and deepen our understanding of the human condition. The oldest among us are therefore indeed like libraries of human experience. When elders share their stories, they pass on to others their accumulated wisdom. Unfortunately, America has provided few opportunities for its elders to share their lives' stories with their communities. Too often older Americans have been dismissed, denied meaningful social roles, sequestered by a culture that views old age only in terms of decline. Fortunately, America is changing. A sudden and intense shift in ideology is underway in the U.S., and with this shift a new field has emerged that may well transform what it means to grow old. That field is creative aging.

In many cultures and in other times, elders held a vital role in their communities: They were the carriers of history and values — values of caring, continuity and connection. I myself had the good fortune of having my grandparents present in my childhood. My grandfather told me stories of his journey to America from Poland. He taught me the history of immigration. My grandmother taught me how to embroider — an art that is nearly lost now. My grandparents were my connection to my cultural heritage. And they knew it — it gave them pride and fostered a powerful bond between us. That powerful bond is what inspired me to found Elders Share the Arts in 1979.

When I first began to explore what I termed "Living History Theater" with older people in senior centers, I was stunned. First, there was no field: I had few colleagues and no contemporary precedents. Second, many of the professionals I encountered in senior centers and nursing homes would observe my artistic work with older people and ask me: "Why bother?" At that time, gerontology still conceived of the last years of life as years of inevitable decline, marred by disease and senility. Scant attention was given to "quality of life" or "lifelong learning," terminology that is so popular today. I would try to explain that each generation stands on the shoulders of the generation before it. I would try to explain that stories from our elders connect us to culture and history. I would explain that elders were hungry to share their stories because they didn't want to be irrelevant, insignificant or forgotten.

Twenty-five years ago, my explanations mostly fell on deaf ears. In 1979, key theorists had already paved the way for a massive shift in the American paradigm of aging, but those theories had not yet gained wide parlance in the field. In 1967, Erik Erikson had published "Identity and the Life Cycle," in which he linked each phase of life to a key psychological task. He suggested that the key psychological task of old age was integration, whereby we reflect on our lives' histories, confront our failures and celebrate our successes and integrate both into our present. Those of us who succeed in this task achieve wisdom; those of us who are unable to do so find their last years plagued by despair. The significance of Erikson's theory was that it was the first to hypothesize that human development continued throughout the lifespan. Old age, like childhood and earlier adulthood, could be marked by self-discovery and growth. In 1975, gerontologist Robert Butler expanded on Erikson's theory in "Why Survive? Being Old In America." Where gerontologists had previously assumed that elders are predisposed to reminisce, they had generally dismissed this reminiscence as unhealthy, even pathological. Butler linked the

act of reminiscence to Erikson's theory of integration and challenged gerontologists not only to tolerate reminiscence in their clients, but to actively nurture it.

Butler's theory paved the way for a blossoming of reminiscence models in the field of gerontology. Over the years, Elders Share the Arts (ESTA) developed its own art-based models for oral history and reminiscence: transforming memories into poems, dances, plays, murals, memory boxes, paintings, quilts. Over time, it grew easier to justify ESTA's work in the clinical terms of Erikson and Butler. But still there was no *general* understanding of the importance of creativity in old age; the arts had not yet articulated their place in field of gerontology. It has only been in these first years of the 21st century that professionals in gerontology, social work, education and the arts have developed a keen interest in the theory and practice of creative work with elders. I attribute this in part to biomedical advances against some of the more debilitating physical conditions of old age. We can now expect to live longer, healthier lives. I also think interest has increased as our Baby Boomers reach retirement. We are undergoing a major demographic shift in America. By the year 2030, 28 percent of the population will be over 60, and the number over 85 will triple. For both biomedical and demographic reasons, we find ourselves quite suddenly with an extraordinary opportunity: the opportunity to transform the experience of old age in America.

One significant stride toward this transformation came in 2000 with the publication of "The Creative Age: Awakening Human Potential in the Second Half of Life" by Gene Cohen. Cohen's book was the first to articulate a new paradigm and an emerging field: creative aging. His book documents recent discoveries in neuroscience that radically challenge conventional assumptions about the aged brain. For example, studies have shown that it is not the number of neurons that dictates brain function, but the number and strength of the connections *between* neurons. While the human brain does in fact lose neurons throughout life, it does not lose its capacity for forming and deepening connections between the neurons that remain. In fact, studies have found that between one's early 50s and late 70s there is actually an increase in both the number and length of branches from individual neurons in different parts of the brain that are involved with higher intellectual functioning. However, neuroscientists believe that in order for the brain to maintain connections between its neurons, and especially to forge new connections, it needs to be challenged. In other words, it is not old age *per se* that reduces the brain's functioning. It's stagnation that threatens the brain, like the stagnation that occurs when elders are cut off from meaningful opportunities for stimulation and growth. This is why quality arts programming is so essential in the late years of life: It is deeply challenging because it calls on the elder to tap the most essential parts of their personal and their cultural identity. Through the creative process, elders learn new skills, discover new aspects of their selves, and find new ways to express and perceive the world.

Today, across America, we are seeing an effusion of arts programs for elders. Where ESTA once worked in a virtual vacuum, we are now one organization among many dedicated to promoting creativity in later life. I would like to describe several outstanding programs here, each of which represents a distinct approach to this work: the arts as healing, the arts as lifelong learning, and the arts as community building.

The first program that I would like to highlight is Artworks, an artist-in-residence program sponsored by San Francisco's Institute on Aging, a multiservice organization that serves elders throughout the Bay area. Artworks seeks to address the social and spiritual needs of its clients. In the last stage of life, the individual's experiences are often rendered

invisible in a nursing home or hospital. Who is the stroke victim or the dementia patient? Inside our institutions our elders often feel like nothing more than the sum of their medical symptoms. Often, a fascinating life history is locked in a frail body, ready to be released with the support of an artist or creative art therapist. The arts can help alleviate the loss of personal identity that many elders experience upon admission to a nursing home or hospital. This is a central aim of Artworks, which provides exhibit and performance opportunities for more than 600 older adults in senior centers around San Francisco.

Artworks offers a variety of residencies, many of which promote traditional art forms. I had the pleasure of visiting the On Lok Nursing Home facility, where I observed the extraordinary, culturally sensitive work of Artwork's Asian-American resident artists. Elders at this site had produced exquisite Chinese brush paintings for an exhibit at the center. Artworks asked the nursing home to designate permanent wall space to exhibit these paintings. The stunning display celebrated the Chinese heritage of many of On Lok's residents, doing much to transform the generically medical appearance of the center. Further, the Artworks staff professionally framed each painting and displayed it with the name of the artist, a photo and a statement of artistic vision. This public celebration of each artist's personal identity certainly helped to alleviate the enormous loss of identity that the elders had endured upon institutionalization.

The second program I wish to describe is Center in the Park in Philadelphia, Pa. Like Artworks, Center in the Park offers high-quality community arts programming. What I would like to emphasize here, in particular, is that the arts programs at Center in the Park are grounded in the theory of lifelong learning. Educational organizations around the country are recognizing that well, older adults still have the capacity — and hunger — to learn. Elderhostel, universities, libraries, senior centers and nursing homes increasingly offer educational programs for the older learner. Center in the Park is one of only a few senior centers in the United States that has taken it upon itself to promote artistic learning through its rigorous and comprehensive arts curriculum. Center in the Park is a community-based senior center that primarily serves African-American elders who live independently in Northwest Philadelphia. Visual arts have always been an important element of the Center's programming. The curriculum incorporates traditional painting and sketching, pottery, collage and multimedia. Many of the works created at Center in the Park reflect the African-American heritage of the elders the Center serves. Roughly 125 elder artists are current participants in the curriculum.

By committing to quality, professionally implemented arts programming, Center in the Park has departed from the "arts & crafts" offerings found in the majority of centers across America and replaced it with a challenging, multifaceted creative arts curriculum. The arts are not "busywork." They are instead a powerful vehicle for lifelong learning. Participating elders are encouraged to explore new art forms, and to strive for new levels of sophistication in art forms they have already mastered.

For some elders Center in the Park offers a vital opportunity to re-create themselves through artistic means. For example, Ed Droughn never had an art class until he became a member of Center in the Park. Although he has been a musician for many years, arthritis had debilitated his hands and left him unable to play his guitar. At Center in the Park, Ed found new purpose for his hands in pottery class where he created a delightful sculpture of a guitar player. The sculpture, entitled "Fast Eddie," was part of a three-month exhibit of Center in the Park works at the African American Museum in

Philadelphia. The exhibit, called "Art Without Boundaries," gave testament to the fact that aging does not diminish creative potential.

A third approach to arts programming for elders is a community-based approach that recognizes the arts as an effective conduit of empowerment. In New York City, many of our elders live in changing communities, left behind as lifelong neighbors and familiar institutions move on. Many, afraid of crime and violence, avoid leaving their homes. Cultural programs can intervene by bringing elders into contact with other members of their communities in order to uncover shared aspirations and common ground. Such intergenerational, cross-cultural programming is at the heart of our work at Elders Share the Arts.

Elders Share the Arts, a nationally recognized community arts organization, is dedicated to using the Living History arts to honor diverse traditions, to connect generations and cultures and to validate the worth of lifetime experience. Through an unique synthesis of oral history and the creative arts, ESTA staff work with the old and young to transform their life stories into dramatic, literary and visual presentations. Each year, ESTA runs roughly 25 programs throughout the New York City, reaching approximately 500 workshop participants a week. Each spring, ESTA reaches thousands of New Yorkers at its Living History festivals. These festivals culminate year-long partnerships in communities throughout New York and provide the opportunity, through performance and exhibitions, for cultures and generations to celebrate their unique histories and their common ground. Finally, ESTA reaches thousands of professionals who work with elders through its trainings.

One example of an intergenerational project linking senior centers with neighboring high schools is the "Bushwick, Why Vote?" project. Bushwick is a largely African-American community in Brooklyn, N.Y. This low-income neighborhood lacks economic and institutional infrastructure. As in many urban neighborhoods, these chronic problems have slowly eroded the social structure of the community. We created a community arts partnership between a local senior center and high school in order to nurture meaningful connections and communal problem-solving between Bushwick's generations. Early into our 30-week partnership, we discovered that the participating seniors were perplexed that local youth rarely vote. They themselves had fought so hard for the right to vote, and they worried about the implications of the apathy they saw in young people. When the seniors began their weekly sessions with the high-school students, the seniors told stories of growing up down South, lynching and voter registration. The students shared that they felt their vote didn't make a difference. They felt discouraged and overwhelmed by the political and economic obstacles they faced.

As the project emerged, the ESTA staff taught theater skills, playwriting and production. By the end of the year, the participants had created an original play, "Bushwick, Why Vote?" This play was performed at high schools throughout the area, and the cast members sparked lively discussions with their audiences after each performance. Wherever they performed, they carried voter registration cards. Over the span of their performances, they registered more than 500 new voters. Art builds community.

There is an extraordinary array of innovative arts programs for seniors. Across America, community-based arts have gained momentum because they offer elders opportunities to heal, to grow and learn and to serve meaningful roles in their communities. The National Endowment for the Arts recognizes the astronomical growth of this field; in 1998 they asked me to organize a national coalition of individuals and organizations in the field of

creative aging. In response, I founded the National Center for Creative Aging (NCCA). Using the local initiatives of Elders Share the Arts as a springboard, the NCCA has developed into a national organization dedicated to shaping the field of creative aging. The NCCA seeks to foster an understanding of the vital relationship between creative expression and healthy aging and to develop programs to build on that understanding by offering professional trainings, supporting the replication of best-practice models throughout the country, developing and disseminating resource materials, serving as a clearinghouse for the exchange of information and supporting research, policy and advocacy.

When I began my work 25 years ago, I never dreamed that community-based arts with elders would gain such momentum. Yet here we are, and our resources and expertise are flourishing.

*If you are interested in learning more about the future of creative aging, please join the Arts & Aging Resource Database by contacting the National Center for Creative Aging, 138 South Oxford Street, Brooklyn, NY 11217. Phone: 718-398-3870. E-mail: [ncca@creativeaging.org](mailto:ncca@creativeaging.org) Web site: [www.creativeaging.org](http://www.creativeaging.org)*

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