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# preserving your Memory

The Magazine of Health and Hope



## Deirdre Imus

Green Activist and  
Best Selling Author

**The latest news on  
Alzheimer's research  
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**Diane Keaton**  
Talks About Her Family  
and Her Book

# MetLife Foundation Gives Major Grant to Arts Learning

Lifetime Arts, Inc., a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, has received a \$125,000 grant from MetLife Foundation to pilot an arts education program in three library systems nationwide.

The MetLife Foundation Creative Aging Libraries Project will expand its work through partnerships with Boston Public Library, Dallas Public Library and Miami-Dade Public Library. The program places professional teaching artists with workshops in all disciplines where older adults can learn and engage with each other socially. The project builds on Lifetime Arts' work with public libraries in New York State.

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"MetLife Foundation is committed to making arts accessible to people of all ages," said Dennis White, President and CEO of MetLife Foundation. "We are pleased to support the Creative Aging Libraries Project to help public libraries strengthen connections with older adults through high-quality, participatory arts programs."

"Lifetime Arts is very grateful for MetLife Foundation's pioneering support of 'creative aging,'" said Maura O'Malley, President and CEO of Lifetime Arts. "This grant sends a clear message that our work at the intersection of aging and the arts is making a significant contribution to redefining aging in America."

We spoke with Maura O'Malley about the project and what it means for aging Americans and all of us.

***Preserving Your Memory: What does the term "creative aging" mean?***

**Maura O'Malley:** The field of creative aging focuses on the role of the arts in enhancing the quality of life in older adults. Creative aging programs are professionally conducted instructional arts programs in all disciplines. The teachers are professional teaching artists. In general,



Photo: Lifetime Arts

Painting in the Yonkers Public Library, Yonkers, N.Y.

we would say that creative aging programs are sequential skill-building programs so that people are learning how to dance, how to write, and how to engage in various disciplines—building skills over time.

**PYM: Why was the MetLife Foundation Creative Aging Libraries Project started? What need was it aimed at meeting?**

**MO:** It's work that we've been doing for a while. There was a need to address the growing population of older adults, as people are living longer, healthier lives. They're looking for engagement in creative areas. It's not business as usual for older adults, it's about active, engaged learning. Baby boomers are turning 70 and are looking for these opportunities. Also, libraries are the most universal, democratic institutions in the U.S.

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They're in every community, and they are becoming more and more centrally important as centers for lifelong learning. Librarians are looking for ways to provide this programming. Twenty-two percent of library patrons are over the age of 65. Also, older adults are looking for

## **There are two main goals:**

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- 2) to build the capacity of public libraries to respond to the growing needs for services for an aging population.**

engagement at a different level. Library budgets have been slashed, and these programs give them new resources. There are two main goals: 1) Improve the quality of life of older adults through instructional arts programming, and 2) to build the capacity of public libraries to respond to the growing need for services for an aging population. The program includes not just direct service, but also training librarians to help them identify local arts resources, to help them identify what their facilities can support, what kinds of programs will work for their particular patrons. Part of what the project provides is technical assistance toward how to implement arts learning programs.

### **PYM: Is this program something that could be replicated at other libraries around the country?**

**MO:** Absolutely. In fact, the MetLife pilot is a replication of the work we've been doing in New York State. We're involved in a large project now with the Institute for Museum and Library Services, a two-year project we're doing with four libraries in NY state and the American Library Association, and the goal there is to develop a replicable model that can be rolled out to the rest of the U.S. (models for urban, suburban and rural library systems). Part of that is done through planting projects in public libraries across the state, in part by producing an online toolkit for public libraries so they can implement it in their own facilities. Arts

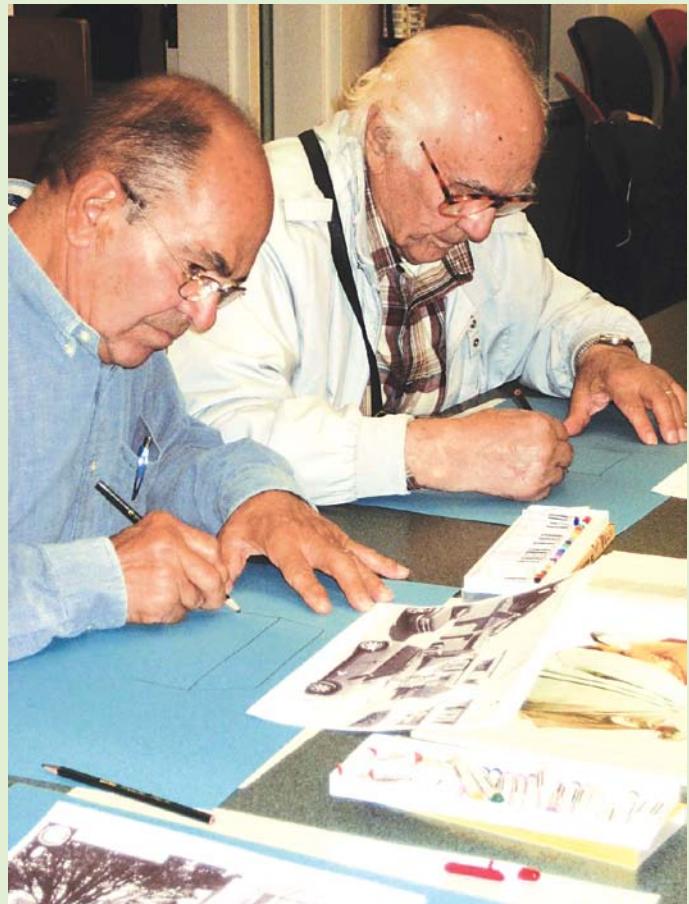


Photo: Josh Millis

Drawing in the Morris Park Library, Bronx, N.Y.

education for everyone is important and beneficial, as research indicates. In particular, one research project (The Creativity and Aging Study, George Washington University, 2006) looked at three years of participation in arts programs in various disciplines in people over 80 years of age. They saw benefits to these study participants, people were taking less medication, living fuller lives, etc. So this work is really important.

Many libraries don't have the programming to help aging populations, to help engage people in this age group. There's a big shift going on in this country in terms of looking at aging as a period of growth and opportunity—rather than as a period of decline, isolation and loss.

People who come to these programs range in age from 50 to 100. They come to learn, and are serious about learning. They have very specific goals about what they want to learn and how they want to learn it. It's also about social engagement, being with other people and sharing the experiences with others. Aging is, in part,



Dancing in the Somers Public Library, Somers, N.Y.

an experience of losses—children move out, spouses pass away—and these workshops can add a sense of something gained.

This is really important for caregivers, especially. We knew as caregivers ourselves that we needed engagement, and found that it was transformative for us and for others to be engaged, as well.

Ninety-nine percent of the people who come to these programs have no experience in the arts at all. They have arrived at this point in their lives when they have time to learn what they've thought about over all these years, to tell their stories, and to learn technique and history and context in their chosen discipline. We're talking about active engagement and life-changing experiences for individual people.

The work in creative aging is instructional, in terms of teaching new skills in art-making, but the results are often therapeutic. Therapy isn't the goal, but it is a benefit of this kind of program.

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**PYM:** Given how fast our nation's demographics are aging, how important are initiatives like this for our future? What benefits will they deliver?

**MO:** It's incredibly important. This initiative, because it is a structural model and has a capacity-building feature to it, has the potential to reach people all over the country. Librarians are left with skills that will enable them to do this work and partnerships with artists and others in the community who can be valuable resources. And it builds lines of communication between libraries and their local communities. There's a huge need for this work. We're also involved in connecting the dots between aging services and the school communities, between libraries and aging services organizations, etc. As a society, we have to figure out how we want to age, how productive we want to be in our senior years. People need to think about how they want to grow old, what kind of quality of life they want to have in their later years. Also, we want to make the connection between families that are often spread apart, and we can do that through the arts, building those partnerships, making those connections. ■