A program aimed at engaging older Americans with the arts in public libraries that began in New York has now rolled out to 18 public libraries in Boston, Dallas and Miami, thanks to continued support from MetLife Foundation.

The MetLife Foundation Creative Aging Libraries Project is designed and administered by New Rochelle, New York-based Lifetime Arts, Inc. This second phase of the project began in December 2012 and continues through this spring. The project connects professional teaching artists with older adults in free instructional arts workshops (in all disciplines) held at public libraries. The project is designed to foster mastery and promote meaningful social engagement, considered two key ingredients for positive aging.

“With this new set of creative aging programs, MetLife Foundation is helping us share Lifetime Arts' successful program model with major library systems beyond New York City, which had received national attention because it demonstrates that active, engaged learning in the arts has significant benefits for older adult participants—and because it provides new programming for public libraries — helping them to respond to the growing demand for meaningful programs for today’s older adults (55+). MetLife Foundation wanted to bring the work out beyond New York City, and now we’ve rolled out to 18 libraries in three cities. In each of those cities we trained artists and library personnel. The libraries were chosen because of their interest in serving older adults, demographics, and other factors, such as the strength of their arts communities. These programs are getting under way shortly and throughout the spring. They run the gamut, all disciplines. The projects have been enthusiastically received and endorsed. It’s fun working with the different cities. The Institute for Museum and Library Services (the federal agency that oversees libraries from a federal level) is encouraging us to roll this out more broadly, so we’re currently writing a proposal to expand our work out to 18 more library systems across the country. Right now we’re in the midst of a two-year pilot. We’ve been encouraged by all of our partners to roll this out in a sort of national expansion to create an affiliate group of libraries, and we’ll work with them over the next 3 years to help them build their capacity to do this work, including professional training, access to resources, etc. With the American Library Association we’re currently developing an online toolkit that we’ll have ready by June 2013, which will provide information, templates,
etc., to librarians across the country. So this is becoming very rapidly a national initiative. Our role in helping build this is becoming more prominent, too. AARP Foundation has taken notice of the work and they’re supporting the libraries project, and they’re taking a look at this work because it is effective in combating isolation among older adults. In a series of 8-10 weeks, people come together around the learning facilitated by a professional teaching artist, and these artists are able to create an environment where adults can learn new skills and build community. These projects have all been unique, every library program is unique because the adults who come to them are unique, as well as the teaching artists who conduct the programs. Public libraries are free and open to the public, welcoming to older adults. People can take risks around learning, they’re encouraged, and their achievements are honored and shared. They have an enormous impact on people’s lives.

One example: In one of the culminating events of a choral ensemble program, two people announced their engagement.

Preserving Your Memory: The project promotes mastery of an art form as well as meaningful social engagement for its participants. Why are these facets so important to project participants?

Maura O’Malley: By this we mean learning new things, and making new friends. Part of the idea is that as people age, this sort of natural aging process, people experience a series of losses—they stop working, people move away, kids leave home, sometimes they lose a spouse. So making connections is critical, and these projects where people come together around learning are extremely potent vehicles for helping people connect in new ways to other people and to their own lives. In every case, people have had amazing things happen. People are learning new things and sharing them. Every project culminates with a public sharing of some kind—a performance, or an art show, etc. So it begins to shift the way people think about aging, away from the negative view of aging to a positive view, one where life is ripe with opportunity and challenge and engagement. So all this kind of resonates with lots of different people, everyone in this age range, 55 and up, up to 95 and 98 years old. All kinds of people are all the sudden unleashed and able to express themselves. We’re all in this same club, we’re all headed in this direction, and even now we have elderly parents, or we’re boomers and getting there ourselves. The teaching artists find a new way of thinking about what it means to age, and what it means to learn and be a community.

Preserving Your Memory: What sort of feedback are you getting from the librarians, artists and participants?

Maura O’Malley: Overwhelmingly positive. It’s our mission to continue bringing together all the partners to make this kind of work happen. Arts education,
library services, cultural institutions—all these come together in this work to make the projects happen. So it’s continuing to expand and grow. We’re also partnering with American Library Association and Temple University’s Intergenerational Institute.

**Preserving Your Memory: What is required for libraries across the nation to develop their own programs? What resources are available to them?**

**Maura O’Malley:** We’re developing a training curriculum that will roll out over the next three years that includes everything from how to pay the artists, to how you engage the community, etc. It’s a shift in thinking about older adults, who we are, and what we’re capable of. In terms of public libraries, services for older adults have been assigned to the outreach department. This work is shifting that view from the needy, negative deficit view to the positive, engaged, active view. So it’s been extremely fulfilling and we’ve learned so much from our partners. We learn every day about new ways to do this work, how to share the information.

We actually measure the impact of the work on older adults in terms of quality of life, particularly in terms of combating isolation. We’ll also be partnering with Self Help Inc. They have created a computer system for isolated older adults. They set up computers in homes of homebound older adults, one that has a touch-screen system, so they can actually virtually join live programs in senior centers and participate in the program. In partnership with Queens Public Library and Self Help, Inc., we’ll be piloting this technology in two libraries with creative aging programs. As many as five or six people can be virtually there in the room, and there is live interaction between the teaching artists and the participants there with them, as well as the homebound people via the Internet. Organizations and agencies are excited about the opportunities to partner, and we’re finding that people have the same goals: improving the quality of life for older adults, increasing the importance of public libraries as community institutions.

**Preserving Your Memory: Ultimately, what would you like to see in terms of spreading the Creative Aging Libraries Project to more libraries?**

**Maura O’Malley:** What we’re trying to build is an affiliated network of practitioners. There’s an enormous need for training, on both the library side and the artist side, on the community side and the individual side. Our efforts are to deliver programming that’s meaningful to the local population. One of the ways we’ve been doing this is working from the top down and the bottom up. So we’re bringing people together to meet these goals. What we hope to see is, over time, that libraries across the nation are able to deliver this kind of programming. No one can do this work on their own. The more we combine resources and work together, the greater the likelihood that more adults will be engaged—it’s a strategic rollout of the program itself, along with the dissemination and sharing of information. We need to make a big effort to share the information and show what happens. People need to see how it works and to see that it’s beyond passive entertainment, and that we adults need to identify as part of the group ourselves. There’s a better way to grow older in this country, and that’s what we’d like to see—meaningful arts programs all over the country in which libraries and older individuals are creatively engaged in a vital community.