Lifetime Arts
Delivering Arts Education Programs for Today’s Older Adults

By Shannon K. McDonough

Increasingly important as community centers for learning and cultural access, libraries are struggling to respond to the changing needs of today’s older adult library patrons. One of the biggest related questions facing library system directors, branch managers, and programming librarians is what kind of programs can libraries provide that offer meaningful engagement for older adults—and how can libraries implement and pay for programs with limited staff and shrinking budgets? Through the development of their award-winning program, the Creative Aging Libraries Project, Lifetime Arts has cracked the code to this conundrum, already having partnered with 125+ libraries and assisted and trained 250 librarians to work with professional teaching artists and engaging thousands of older adults in nearly 1,000 visual, performing, and literary arts classes. This innovative program model is demonstrating how public libraries can fulfill their potential as community centers for positive and creative aging.

As of 2011, a whopping one-quarter of the U.S. population is aged 55 or older. Despite the fact that the people who span different generations have varying life experiences, cultural references, and exposure to educational opportunities, they all share the same very human needs: to create, convene, learn, and express themselves. The arts are the perfect lens through which older adults may explore life and share their personal experiences with others.

The fact that the older adult population is growing heralds an exciting opportunity for libraries to reimagine programming for this healthier generation who seek active engagement in a social environment. Libraries, the most universal and most democratic of America’s cultural institutions, are “age neutral” and so appeal to older adults who are reluctant to go to senior centers. Increasingly important as community centers for learning and cultural access, libraries are ideally positioned to evolve as centers for creative aging.

Creative Aging Programs
The emerging field of creative aging focuses on the powerful and beneficial role of the arts in improving the quality of life for older adults. Creative aging programs—arts education for older adults—offer sequential instruction in all disciplines (visual, performing, and literary arts) with goals of skills mastery and social engagement.

Now in its fifth year, the Creative Aging Public Libraries Project is a demonstration and capacity-building program that supports collaborations between professional teaching artists and public libraries resulting in free instructional arts programs for older adults. The program has been developed by Lifetime Arts, a national nonprofit organization based in New York, in partnership with eight major library systems in four states. To build the capacity of libraries to initiate, develop, and sustain creative aging programming, Lifetime Arts provides incentive grants to select library system partners and

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Shannon is currently reading All That We Share: How to Save the Economy, the Environment, the Internet, Democracy, Our Communities and Everything Else that Belongs to All of Us by Jay Walljasper.
Participants in the “Life Maps” workshop held at the Countee Cullen branch of the New York Public Library learned to use collage to create visual expressions.

employs a replicable program model and approach that includes professional development, ongoing technical assistance, and access to resources for participating librarians, library administrators, artists, and other partners.

The work is based on a vision for mobilizing the trusted, familiar, information-rich public space of the library to deliver arts education for older adults. That vision includes building effective collaborations between teaching artists and librarians and building the capacity of different library systems to carry out and sustain creative aging programs.

Teaching artists and librarians find that they share a vision for positive aging and bring complementary strengths to designing and implementing meaningful programs for older adults. One obvious advantage to holding creative aging programs in public libraries is the opportunity for participants to use the library to explore their medium or topic further.

In partnership with the American Library Association’s (ALA) Public Programs Office (PPO), the Creative Aging Libraries Project program model and resources will be disseminated nationally through an online Creative Aging Toolkit for Public Libraries (available in June 2013). Lifetime Arts is currently developing an affiliate network that will offer training, resources, and access to a national network of creative aging practitioners.

This nationally recognized program is funded with generous grants from the Institute for Museum and Library Services, AARP Foundation, Fan Fox and Leslie R. Samuels Foundation, Helen Andrus Benedict Foundation, Laura Jane Musser Trust, MetLife Foundation, and New York State Council on the Arts. Current participating library systems include Boston Public Library; Brooklyn Public Library; Clinton Essex Franklin Library System, headquartered in Plattsburgh, New York; Dallas Public Library; Miami-Dade (Fl.) Public Library System; New York Public Library; and Westchester (N.Y.) Library System.

PPO is supporting the dissemination of the program through Programming Librarian.org and with a preconference workshop and general session at the 2013 ALA Annual Conference.

If Not Now, When?

When Lifetime Arts cofounder and President/CEO Maura O’Malley was caring for her own aging mother, she was struck by the lack of inclusive, participatory arts programs available to this population, who needed something engaging and productive to do with their time. "The assisted living facility where my mother was living offered residents a poetry program, but the poster advertising it stressed that it was ‘not for people who hadn't written poetry before' and specifically uninvited people who wanted to learn how to write poetry," she said. "How frustrating is that?" Moreover, after thirty years in arts education, O’Malley instinctively knew that making art is good for everyone and could be especially good for older adults. She would soon learn that there was research to back up her thinking.

In 2006, Gene Cohen, working out of the Center on Aging, Health and Humanities at George Washington University, published "The Creativity and Aging Study: The Impact of Professionally Conducted Cultural Programs on Older Adults." The goal of this landmark study for which the National Endowment for the Arts was lead sponsor, was “to evaluate the effects relevant to general health, mental health, overall functioning, and sense of well-being in older persons caused by active participation in cultural programs provided by professional artists involved in visual and literary arts, music, and other cultural domains." Cohen’s study found that for those older adults who participated in long-term, culturally enriching programs,

- overall health improved and stabilized;
- fewer doctor visits were required;
- less medication was necessary;
- fewer suffered from falling down and physical instability;
- feelings of morale increased while symptoms of depression decreased; and
- social and other activity increased, in some cases significantly.

That settled it for O’Malley. Following lengthy conversations over several months with Ed Friedman, longtime deputy director for the Bronx Council on the Arts with
whom O’Malley was serving on a committee, the two veteran arts administrators realized that there was an enormous opportunity for libraries and other community organizations to use arts education programming to drastically improve the lives of older adults.

O’Malley quit her job at a major New York City arts education organization, she and Friedman cofounded Lifetime Arts in 2008, and they positioned it as a service organization to help build an infrastructure for the emerging field of creative aging. Friedman eventually retired from the arts council and started his full-time “encore” career at age 60. He serves as Lifetime Arts’ executive director.

Running the organization out of a spare room in O’Malley’s family home until November 2011, Lifetime Arts quickly attracted partners like the Westchester Library System and the New York Public Library. Through support from generous funders interested in supporting the arts and the use of programming in public libraries to combat isolation in older adults, Lifetime Arts has developed and implemented training institutes, tested and evaluated program service models, launched a creative aging roster of vetted teaching artists, and re-granted more than $375,000 to seven library systems in four states.

What Happens During Library-Based Creative Aging Programs?

Workshop series (usually a minimum of eight sessions, two hours each) are guided by professional teaching artists and allow for in-depth arts learning (mastery). Participants build skills, explore new materials, and learn a variety of art-making techniques. They share their learning with each other through facilitated, modeled conversation (social engagement). On average, registration for each series ranges from ten to twenty, depending on the discipline and space. Choruses often exceed forty participants.

Teaching artists create a safe, risk-free environment where experimentation and engagement is encouraged. Importantly, creative aging library programs foster new relationships between older adults and the larger community. They succeed in breaking down the chronic isolation and passive existence of many older adults as they unlock expressive abilities.

At each library, a culminating event—free and open to the public—celebrates the achievements of each participant and provides confirmation of the value of their work. Event attendees find encouragement and inspiration in the celebration of their peers’ accomplishments.

Librarians promote the workshop series locally and recruit participants. Partnering librarians and artists work together to identify library materials and resources to enhance the instruction, and librarians help patrons access those materials, further strengthening the bond between patron and library.

How It Works

The first step in planning any creative aging program in your library is to find out about the older population of your community and how it uses the library currently. Perhaps you have surveyed the population already to learn about their interests. If you haven’t asked your older adult patrons about their interests, do. You’ll be surprised! It is also a great idea to get to know which organizations in your community are offering arts education programs and which are already serving the 55+ population.

Knowing the answers to these questions will help you to determine what type of creative aging programming at your library makes sense for your community and whether there are partnerships that can be struck to take advantage of momentum and funding already in play.

In addition to the in-kind staff cost of running a public library program, an average eight-session creative aging workshop costs between $1,800 and $3,500. Teaching artist fees for instruction range between $35 and $150 per hour, and their planning and prep time ranges between $25 and $50 per hour. Art materials and supplies for participants (depending on the discipline) range between $10 and $35 per person.

Current Creative Aging Libraries Project participants are funded through restricted grants to serve particular library systems. Library Friends groups, local

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10. Self-Discipline

The honor system is the best system. Self-control is the best control. Self-monitoring one's own work ethics and habits and inspecting one's own work is the best quality control. A cataloging librarian should have ownership of his or her work.

The self-motivated plan is the best plan. A cataloging librarian should develop his or her own daily, weekly, and monthly plans to increase cataloging productivity. He or she should set up his or her own short- and long-term professional career development plans or programs to improve and maintain professional knowledge in cataloging. Investing for the future is crucial to success in any career.

The work of the cataloging librarian is to examine physical items or electronic resources to be cataloged. It involves repetitiveness of scanning or typing and sitting and reading a computer screen for extended periods. Sometimes this can cause health problems. It is important to take care of one's health to avoid carpal tunnel syndrome, back pain, or eye problems. To be more productive, the workstation should be configured to support neutral body positioning and facilitate a comfortable posture.

A cataloging librarian has coworkers, but most of the time works alone and independently. He or she needs to be comfortable working alone independently, not easily distracted by background noise, and able to concentrate on his or her own work.

Conclusion

Success as a cataloging librarian requires a commitment to acquire and maintain professional knowledge in cataloging and maintain high productivity in both quality and quantity. The roles and duties of the cataloging librarian are important because circulation and reference staff and patrons rely on and use the information that a cataloging librarian inputs into the ILS. He or she needs to make diligent and systematic efforts to input the data in the ILS accurately so it can be easily searchable by catalog users. Periodically ask yourself, "Do I have the essential qualities for this position?" and commit to doing all the things that would enable you to answer yes. Good luck on your cataloging librarian position!

REFERENCES


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businesses, partnerships with arts organizations, library programming budgets, bequests, and foundation grants are all sources for program support.

Determine if there is adequate and appropriate space available in your library for arts instruction in the disciplines that you would like to offer. For example, wet media require a nearby water source. Similarly, if you are partnering with a senior center or other community space to offer a creative aging workshop series, determine whether they have the right kind of space, and be careful about the scheduling so that the classes don't conflict with other regularly scheduled events (like meals). While your teaching artist partner is facilitating the program, the library coordinator will need to allocate time to provide administrative support.

Creative aging programs are defined as sequential learning (usually eight to twelve sessions) in a particular arts discipline led by qualified teaching artists. The artist develops and teaches a curriculum that will build skills mastery and foster social interaction. Teaching artists should focus on developing the skills of participants so that they can create original, expressive artwork. This includes learning how to use art-making materials and tools and experimenting with various forms and techniques. A skilled teaching artist builds opportunities for meaningful social engagement into each workshop session. While drop-in classes or even regular meetings (like knitting groups) in libraries are beneficial, they don't necessarily have the same impact as creative aging programs do.

Similarly, while librarians and local artists who show work at the library may forge lasting relationships, there is a big difference between an accomplished artist giving a successful talk on her own work and a teaching artist delivering sequential, skill-building art instruction. Sometimes these are the same people, other times they are not. Local arts organizations are great resources for finding qualified teaching artists in your area.

Subscribe to the Lifetime Arts YouTube Channel (youtube.com/lifetimearts) to view videos of participants, teaching artists, and librarians. Follow @lifetimearts on Twitter and like us at Facebook.com/lifetimearts.

REFERENCES