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CREATING ART INSPIRES WELLNESS AMONG NORTH DAKOTA ELDERS

By **LINDSAY ROSE RUSSELL**

Carefully rearranging pictures of grandchildren and ancestors, residents of the assisted living facility made room in their small apartments to display their own original artwork. The watercolors, quilts and pottery resulted from a yearlong arts program at their long-term care center, Pioneer House, in Fargo. Designed by the North Dakota Council on the Arts (NDCA), the Art for Life Project did much more than bring folk and contemporary fine artists to an assisted living facility: It measurably improved the lives of participants, visibly fostered a healthier community and innovatively addressed issues of eldercare.

Adults age 65 or older constitute about 12% of the U.S. population, and with the aging of the boomer generation that figure will likely rise to 20% by 2030. With almost a third of all state expenditures going to healthcare, and the vast majority of that spending attributable to care for elders, North Dakota and other states with large older populations can expect an increase in the census of long-term care facilities. These elders are at heightened risk for depression and other severe disabilities requiring costly treatment. The Art for Life Project shows how state arts agencies can help state leaders and care providers employ the arts to enhance the health and welfare of elders.

ARTS APPRENTICES

The inspiration for the project came from an NDCA apprenticeship in which folk artists Mary O'Reilly-Seim and Lila Hauge-Stoffel demonstrated natural textile-dyeing techniques for the elderly residents of Pioneer House. These two women were able to blend their artistic skills and experience with a high level of instructional expertise. O'Reilly-Seim is a trained recreational therapist and master weaver, and Hauge-Stoffel is an assistant professor of arts education at Minnesota State University, Moorhead. Their demonstration met with such enthusiasm that NDCA folklorist Troyd Geist collaborated with the artists to develop a more extensive program for residents.

Using funding from the National Endowment for the Arts' Challenge America program, along with local in-kind contributions from Pioneer House and state support from the legislature, the Art for Life Project organized a series of 35 participatory arts activities, such as storytelling, quilting and painting. Each session offered an opportunity for residents to learn, create and connect. Activities in seven art forms were led by seven distinguished North Dakota artists.

Among the artists were Mary Louise Defender Wilson, an elder Dakotah Sioux storyteller and National Endowment for the Arts Fellow, and Pieper Fleck Bloomquist, an award-winning Swedish Dala and Southern Tapestry painter. All 58 residents of Pioneer House engaged in at least some of the program's activities, and many invited family and friends to participate as well. Workshops drew an average of 20–25 members, with one attracting 70 participants.

HEALTHIER OUTCOMES

The ability of the arts to improve the quality of life for residents of nursing homes and other healthcare facilities is widely documented anecdotally. As part of the Art for Life Project, however, NDCA sought to further explore the effect of the arts in eldercare by capturing quantitative evidence. Working with a geriatric physician, a nurse, a professor of folklore and a statistician, NDCA developed an assessment tool to measure the effects of the program on the negative feelings that often characterize life in institutional settings.

Survey responses showed that after eight months of arts activities, participants felt significantly less bored, lonely and helpless. When asked, “Do you have things to look forward to each day?” residents were initially more likely to reply “not at all” or “rarely.” Their average score for the question was only 43 on the 100-point developmental scale. After participating in arts activities, though, residents’ average score rose to 77 points, meaning that they “sometimes” or “very often” looked forward to something each day. Furthermore, significant developmental increases were seen in the average response to such questions as, “Do you think you can learn new skills?” and “Do you have companions with whom you can share activities?”

The project also helped distract residents, whose average age was 86, from their physical pain and stimulated their cognitive faculties. The traditional arts used in the program were especially useful in triggering memories while still encouraging participants to make meaningful decisions in their own work. According to Hauge-Stoffel, “The activities and the interaction with family, artists and other residents improved participants’ concentration, renewed their sense of dignity and changed their physical stature. It reminded them that they are valuable members of a community.”

O’Reilly-Seim, a Pioneer House activities director, stated, “We as a culture tend to underestimate the tremendous potential that people of advanced age still have. Human beings need artistic influences all the time, and there is a measurable difference in introducing creativity into the lives of residents in institutional settings.” As the artists engaged residents in traditional and contemporary art forms, they also helped residents interact with one another and connect with family and friends.

MODELING SUCCESS

The project yielded such positive benefits for both elders and the artists that NDCA was eager to share the experience. In 2003, the agency compiled stories and statistics from the project in a guide, titled *Art for Life: The Therapeutic Power and Promise of the Arts*, for securing funding and replicating similar programs. It was distributed to long-term care facilities, artists and arts organizations across North Dakota. “A small state needs to be creative about how it designs projects, to deal with them in a way that others can be inspired by them, empowered by them and take control themselves,” Geist noted.

The state arts agency offers guidance and financial support for such programming through its Community Access grants, which support nonprofit organizations that present arts programming in small, rural or otherwise underserved communities, such as senior centers. Since the conclusion of the pilot project, similar programs have begun or are planned elsewhere in North Dakota, including a hospital in Fargo and a nursing home in Jamestown. The project has even inspired communities as far away as Kansas City, Mo., and Vancouver, B.C., to develop projects.

What began with an apprenticeship has become a thread of inspiration and reinvigoration for numerous people for whom even the simplest creative activity can bring meaning and connection beyond the facility walls. One resident remarked of her watercolor, “I’m going to send this to my grandchildren to put on their refrigerator.” ❖

Lindsay Rose Russell is a research associate at the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies.