



Bringing the generations together through arts activities

Creative experiences foster relationships that enhance wellness and enrich the lives of young and old alike

by Jenifer Milner

University students who write the life stories of retirement community residents. Young musicians who play in an orchestra with retired professionals. High school youth who partner with elders in art classes at a continuing care retirement community. And adults in their 20s who study digital photography in a group that crosses cultures and generations.

These are examples of how participants of all ages can share in creative experiences that bridge the generations and foster enriching relationships.

Although intergenerational offerings vary (along with opinions on elements essential to these programs), Alan Hatton-Yeo, a leader in the field, defines intergenerational practice as follows:

“Intergenerational practice aims to bring people together in purposeful, mutually beneficial activities which promote greater understanding and respect

between generations and may contribute to building more cohesive communities.

Intergenerational practice is inclusive, building on the positive resources that the young and old have to offer each other and those around them.”¹

Hatton-Yeo directs the Beth Johnson Foundation in Stoke-on-Trent, England—an organization dedicated to promoting new approaches to aging—and heads its UK Centre for Intergenerational Practice. He is also secretary of the International Consortium for Intergenerational Programmes (ICIP). At the first-ever ICIP conference in 2002, delegates working to define the field’s key issues concluded that intergenerational practice develops:

- individuals
- community
- society

They added that each level could include subthemes “such as cross-cultural awareness, health and learning.”²

The program providers interviewed for this article have discovered the benefits of bringing the generations together through arts activities. These experiences promote growth, understanding and well-being for participants, and support relationships that can make a profound difference in their lives.

A place for everybody

Lorraine Marks is a passionate believer in intergenerational arts experiences. In fact, she’s living proof of their impact.

When Marks was about 14 years of age, there were no opportunities for her to play violin with a youth orchestra in her community, so her viola teacher—a man in his 70s—allowed her to “string along” with him and his contemporaries in a string quartet. For several years, these adults nurtured Marks’s love and knowledge of music as well as her confidence and abilities, allowing her to play in the ensemble. They also encouraged her to enter the field of music. “It was a very valuable experience for me,” says Marks

today. Her mentors helped her blossom as a person, she explains—and they shaped her life.

Marks, a musician and conductor, is also a music educator and therapist. Seeking to inspire her students and thinking of the impact playing with older musicians had on her, Marks set out in the early 1990s to recreate this experience for other young people, eventually establishing two community orchestras. Developing children and youth as people, as well as musicians, is a central theme of these groups. So is healthy aging. Marks’s father took up music in his 70s, and it enriched his life in many ways, she states. Her efforts provide other older adults in the community with this social and creative outlet.

The award-winning New Jersey Intergenerational Orchestra—which Marks founded and led for a decade before moving to Florida—focuses on classical and popular music, and has welcomed many well-known guest musicians since its start in 1994. Members over the years have included individuals as young as 6 and as old as 92. While the orchestra plays regularly in Union County venues, it has also performed in Washington, DC, and at the Lincoln Center’s fountain plaza in New York. In fact, the group’s highlights include October 1, 2003, when Marks addressed the United Nations and conducted the orchestra for the International Day of Older Persons. This followed the UN’s earlier invitation to Marks to conduct the orchestra for the World Conference on Aging in April 2002.

Like the New Jersey orchestra, the Florida Intergenerational Orchestra of America (FLIOA) exists “to bridge the generations with music and performance through mentorship.” The group, founded by Marks in 2005, consists of musicians ranging in age from 7 to 92, yet there’s a place for everybody in the Boca Raton-based orchestra, Marks says. FLIOA includes:

- a beginning orchestra for adults and children (who receive free instrument rentals)

- an intermediate orchestra for people with some experience
- a full symphony orchestra of about 65 members
- a chamber orchestra of adults, professionals and students

“The wonderful mix of amateurs, professionals, beginners and experts—young and old—encourages, nurtures and promotes closer relationships between the generations,” Marks observes.

Although music brings the orchestra members together, Marks believes it is simply a “backdrop” to the enriching experiences and relationships they enjoy. “In Florida, communities are fragmented,” she states. “You have assisted living, retirement, and gated communities, and there are not many places where older people and children come together. The orchestra provides a very important socialization aspect.”

Children grow to respect elders as they develop relationships while working on the music. As the generations interact, these young people discover the wisdom of adults and learn about the aging process, Marks comments. And older members learn about today’s youth and come to understand them better—“it brings people back to their roots and to remembrance of their own youth,” she says. To further enhance camaraderie among FLIOA members, Marks organizes parties and outings, as well as rehearsals and concerts.

There are some practical challenges when working with a group of musicians with a wide range of ages and abilities, Marks admits. “Rehearsal space has to be very accessible to both children and adults,” she says. People should have to travel only short distances with their instruments and be able to reach the space easily. Also, individuals in the group can have special needs that require adaptive materials—for example, people who have poorer sight or hearing may require larger sheet music. Finally, scheduling can be a challenge. “Children have school and homework,” Marks notes, “and some

Continued on page 42

Bringing the generations together through arts activities

Continued from page 41



Students, residents, instructors and staff gather at a reception and art display for the Partners in Art program. Image courtesy of The Osborn

older adults don't like to come out at night because they have difficulty seeing." She schedules FLIOA rehearsals on Thursdays at 6–9 p.m., with the beginners group first.

Organizations interested in starting an intergenerational orchestra should begin by finding out if there's a need for this kind of activity in the community, advises Marks. "Pay attention to the community itself," she continues. "Reach out to other organizations and listen to their advice." In the end, an organization needs to become part of the community, she says, in order to build community.

A common ground

Creative projects for participants from diverse backgrounds and generations are the specialty of Magic Me, an arts organization located in London, England. Founded in 1989 by Director Susan Langford, the award-winning charity is now a leading provider of intergenerational arts activities in the United Kingdom. These experiences link young people with adults ages 55-plus for "mutual benefit, learning and enjoyment."

According to Magic Me's website, projects to date "have used storytelling, creative writing, photography, weaving, drama, dancing, puppetry, carnival, mosaic, ceramics, painting and poetry to bring together young and old partici-

pants." Activities take place in settings as varied as schools, day centers, nursing homes, and community and cultural organizations.

One example is The Media Group, an initiative that has participants ranging from 22 to 80 years in age. These individuals first started meeting at a day center in east London in September 2006, to develop their digital photography skills under the guidance of professional photographers/Magic Me artists. Photographic assignments sent the participants out into the busy Brick Lane and Bethnal Green Road areas of London, to photograph whatever they desired. From these many images, participants selected then edited their photographs, which were later exhibited at a local performance venue.

In this way, Media Group members developed their digital photography skills—and also their ability to approach people to ask them for permission to photograph them. They have since documented more than 15 Magic Me events and hosted two "family and friends" portrait projects at outdoor festivals, becoming real ambassadors for the organization. A group exhibition, planned for this summer, will feature photographs of the interiors of two local landmarks.

"Every project we run has three kinds of aims to do with the creative arts, with personal development for those who participate and for community development and social interaction," states Langford. "We believe that by coming together, young and older people can do things in new ways, and achieve things that they could not achieve on their own or in their peer groups." She adds, "Working on arts projects with people who are very different to oneself, and have different life experiences and influences, jumps everyone out of their usual ways of doing things and enables people to make work that is fresh, and unexpected."

In Tower Hamlets, the east London community served by Magic Me, the population has changed considerably within living memory due to migration patterns. Today, "the generations are very different in terms of culture, ethnicity and faith," comments Langford. "The school population is over 70% students from families of Bangladeshi, Muslim origin, while 70% of people aged 70-plus are from the white, English community. Chances to meet and mix with neighbors are mostly age related, and there are few natural meeting places or spaces for young and older people to meet," she says. Magic Me's activities bring participants together and allow them "to explore their differences and find common ground."

As an organization, Magic Me stresses the importance of adequate preparation, skilled artists to lead programs, and appropriate projects (see "Why and how to offer intergenerational arts programs" on page 45). Projects also include all of Magic Me's "five senses":

- "Sense of Purpose—worthwhile, purposeful activity; not something to just pass the time
- Sense of Place—projects that grow out of the people and place in which they are run, celebrating and exploring the lives, experiences and concerns of those involved
- Sense of Adventure—projects that offer challenge, the unexpected and new opportunities, and stretch people beyond what they think they can do
- Sense of Occasion—events that people look forward to, prepare for, dress up for, and tell their family and peers about
- Sense of Achievement—projects that include times and structures for reflection, so that participants can enjoy their progress and know what they have achieved"

The individual's capacity for growth and change are central to Magic Me's philosophy and approach. Through its activities, the organization "encourages and enables both young and older people to risk becoming close to other people, taking responsibility, being different and acquiring new skills."

A shared experience

Older adults pair with local high school students for a visual arts program called Partners in Art at The Osborn continuing care retirement community in Rye, New York. Through a once-a-week art class on The Osborn campus and a weekly telephone call, residents and their student partners develop relationships as they hone their artistic skills over six to eight weeks.

Partners in Art began in 2006 with a gift from the family of noted editorial cartoonist and artist Paul T. Arlt, made through the Horace Goldsmith Foundation. The Osborn resident had passed away the previous year, and in his memory, his family wanted to establish an intergenerational program at the community. Mulling over the possibilities, Janet Malang, manager of The Osborn's Sterling Park independent living community, came up with the idea of a visual arts program.

Malang knew about the use of art therapy for people in need of social experiences and cognitive stimulation. She was also inspired by an initiative at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art to host individuals with cognitive decline. Would a shared art experience provide "the connect" between the generations, she wondered, and ease the way to relationships between the residents and Westchester County youth?

The Osborn's staff began putting elements of the arts program together. Space—a key consideration in most program planning—was a nonissue. "We

had a wonderful space that actually had all the right elements for an art studio," says Malang. Situated on the top floor of The Osborn's Strathcona building of independent and assisted living apartments, the bright, open and airy room had skylights and a terrace. It also offered the privacy and quiet needed for participants to interact. With the Arlt family's gift, the facilities department "rehabbed" the space into an art studio dedicated to the artist. "We also worked with artists Bonnie Katzenstein and Rose Leventhal, who guided us on the room's design and supervised and purchased many of the supplies," Malang notes. On June 8, 2006, the community celebrated the studio's opening with a ribbon cutting and reception.

One step that proved more of a challenge than expected was connecting with an agency to bring in the younger participants. In the end, "we needed some help," states Malang. The Arlt family was instrumental in bringing in Dorot, a not-for-profit volunteer agency operating in Manhattan and Westchester County. Dorot's programs provide socially isolated elders in the community with such things as food, friendly visits and educational opportunities; they also foster intergenerational relationships. Acting on The Osborn's behalf, the agency approached Rye Neck Union Free School District and gained its approval to recruit program participants.

The recruitment process implemented for the program has stayed much the same with each Partners in Art session. The process begins with interested students at Rye Neck High School attending an orientation session with Malang; Susan Richter, director of Dorot Westchester; and Debbie Curcio, who has coordinated the program at The Osborn since its start. Students then sign up if they want to participate in the afterschool program.



Musicians attend an event with conductor Lorraine Marks. Image courtesy of the Florida Intergenerational Orchestra of America

Once the students are selected, Malang and Curcio turn their attention to recruiting residents. "We try to recruit from across campus and all three levels of care—independent living, assisted living and skilled nursing," Malang advises. Still, she has found that the numbers may skew to one area over another at times. In addition, while staff especially want to attract socially isolated residents to the program, those interested in participating are sometimes the most able and outgoing individuals. To encourage some residents to join the program, Curcio creates invitations for them.

The program is currently free of charge, so cost is no barrier to participation. Preconceptions, however, are another matter, according to Malang. "All of us assume that we can, or can't, do something," she says. "To try something new—or to open yourself up to another person—can be threatening. The interesting thing is that these are barriers people face at any age." During the orientation, Malang points out this fact to students, telling them that despite the decades between the generations, elders feel the same things, have the same apprehensions, and share the same life concerns as anybody at any age. From that point of view, Partners in Art "is a learning experience for all."

Continued on page 44

Bringing the generations together through arts activities

Continued from page 43



Participants in The Media Group initiative edit their photographs. Credit: The Media Group/Magic Me. Image courtesy of Magic Me

The program's results to date? "Wonderful," exclaims Malang. "At the end of each session, we have an art show and display the works of the residents and students," all of whom take great pride in their work. Several students have enrolled in the program more than once, and some residents have asked to take part in the program again if their student partners return. "So there are residents and students who have established ongoing relationships with each other," she says. "One of the lovely aspects of observing the relationships during the program is the sharing—residents give life lesson hints and students talk about experiences they're having."

Concludes Malang, "Some people are reluctant to give art a try, because they've never painted. But once they understand that the program is really about the relationship between the individuals, and art is a pathway to that relationship, they become more at ease with participating."

A collection of stories

At Pines Village Retirement Communities in Valparaiso, Indiana, Public Relations Director Lisa Huber knows the

beneficial, and lasting, impact of intergenerational arts experiences—not only for participants, but also for providers of these programs. In 2003, Huber and Vicky Gadd, then public relations liaison at Pines Village, developed a storytelling project with Valparaiso University to commemorate the community's 20th anniversary and honor "the remarkable individuals" who lived there. The result was *We Celebrate Life*, an award-winning book that features the life stories and photographs of 20 residents.

The initial idea to publish a book of life stories was Huber's. "I had always wanted to write a book about my grandmother, who was such an inspiration to me," she says, "but I couldn't talk her into the idea—she didn't feel there was anything of value to her story."

At Pines Village, the registered nurse works with more than 100 grandparents every day. So when searching for a way to mark the upcoming Pines Village anniversary, Huber and Gadd pitched the book idea to CEO Laurie Mullet, who loved it. In fact, according to Huber, it was Mullet who suggested

turning the project into an intergenerational program by including student writers. They contacted Valparaiso University's English Department to see if anyone was interested, and Associate Professor Emeritus Kathleen Mullen responded.

Mullen decided to take on the storytelling project as an assignment for her Intermediate Composition class. This provided the young participants with both structure and deadlines for their work, which would include:

- interviewing an older participant
- writing a biographical sketch about the person, as well as an expressive piece (something "more akin to an article," says Mullen)
- editing these pieces with peers

To prepare the students, Mullen taught them about interviewing questions and skills. In addition, Huber and Gadd talked to the class about aging and about the residents at Pines Village. That's when Huber realized what a new experience the project was offering students. A show of hands revealed that all but two individuals in the group had no relationships with adults in their 70s, 80s or 90s, states Huber, adding that "it dawned on me then that young people are not growing up around older people. They're missing out on the benefits of these relationships."

Students could choose their older partners for the project, and Mullen describes students perched on the edge of their seats as they listened to descriptions of the residents. "They were eager to select their partners and to move on to getting to know them better," she says.

Recruiting elders to participate had not been easy, however. "We came up against the same kind of reaction as my grand-

Continued on page 46

Why and how to offer intergenerational arts programs

What are the benefits and barriers involved in intergenerational arts activities? What elements are key to offering a successful program? Susan Langford, director of the English charity Magic Me, which specializes in these programs, shares her expertise below with the *Journal on Active Aging*[®].

JAA: *What key benefits do intergenerational arts programs provide for participants?*

SL: Key benefits are:

- new opportunities to be creative with the arts, or as a member of a community
- greater sense of belonging in the local community—knowing new people and particularly people who are different to oneself
- achieving new things and surprising oneself about what is possible—whether making a painting, or standing up and speaking in front of an audience

JAA: *What are the potential barriers and challenges to overcome?*

SL: Barriers and challenges are many. Projects need to be presented and marketed in ways that entice people to try them, countering the culture of ageist images of both young and older people and what it will be like to spend time with them. We use the arts activities, and choose themes that will encourage and inspire both age groups to come along in the first place. Also, very practical questions need to be answered as you set up a project:

- Where will your target audience feel comfortable, be able to get to easily, be happy to be seen to be visiting?
- How can you explain to them what they will be expected to do and help them feel confident that they can, if they have never tried it before?

JAA: *What things are essential to providing a successful intergenerational arts program?*



Project participants use photography to examine personal views and concepts of beauty. Credit: Anita McKenzie. Image courtesy of Magic Me

SL: The key ones are:

- Finding very good artists to run the project sessions. They need to be skilled, confident and inspiring in their artform(s); able to communicate processes and techniques to participants; able to plan projects and workshop activities that encourage exchange and dialogue; able to negotiate and advocate with schools, care homes, community groups and the professionals who work within them; and able to support a group to grow through their differences and conflicts and understand that these are part of the work.
- Developing and planning projects that fit the people and places who will take part in them. This will ensure that partner organizations give projects the support they need, and that they are given enough status within the organizations to make participants feel valued—and make people want to take part! Starting simple and building up can help overcome barriers such as institutional reluctance to change, full timetables or schedules, lack of money or time, and reluctance to commit.

JAA: *What advice would you give those who want to offer programs for healthy older adults who live in the community? And*

those who want to offer programs for frailer older adults who live in residential settings?

SL: The advice would be the same for both: really think about why you want to do this and what you aim to achieve. You need to look for the right partners—do you want to work with toddlers or teenagers or university students? All will bring different benefits, energies and practical needs to your older-adult group.

How can you design a project that values the experience and skills of all concerned, not just one group doing to or for the other? Be realistic about what you can achieve in the time you have available and leave time for chatting and informal time together. Make sure there is time for artists to get to know the groups separately before they meet, so that the artists can support that meeting and plan it carefully. Don't be afraid to have time for adults and young people separately to reflect, air concerns or frustrations, or to work on something at a different pace.

Essential for all concerned (young, older, staff, partners) is preparation and time to think about the other people, and what one's own role is, and how you will work together. This may include time to debunk ageist assumptions, learn and practice skills such as communicating with someone who has hearing impairments, or learning something about dementia.

Finally, we write, and get partner organizations to sign, a letter of agreement detailing what each partner commits to do, provide, and be responsible for; and each project group agree an agreement or contract for working together. Both are a chance to raise and explore the difficult bits, before you get to them. Make sure you think carefully with your partners about child and adult protection issues—but don't let it freeze you into inaction. ☺

The Journal on Active Aging[®] thanks Susan Langford for her help with this article. To learn more about Magic Me, visit www.magicme.co.uk.

Bringing the generations together through arts activities

Continued from page 44

mother's," Huber reveals. "So we had to overcome barriers to get residents to participate." One barrier was the year-and-a-half time frame. "The majority of residents were concerned that they wouldn't be able to finish the project, because of possible health declines," she recalls. But the biggest challenge turned out to be the amount of control residents wanted over their stories—something they hadn't expected. Individuals became invested in their stories, Huber explains, and wanted additional input and/or changes even after final edits.

Despite their initial hesitation, the Pines Village residents became engaged once the project got going and they realized what was involved. They felt valued and listened to by the students, and were happy to take part. Not only did people eventually "see the benefit of participating in the project," advises Huber, but they also took pride in the book.

According to Mullen, the students became genuinely interested in the project and enjoyed the experience of talking to older adults. "The strength and intensity of the elders' experiences were revelations for my students," she reports. "When you're young, you think elders are old and faded and don't feel as strongly as you do," but this stereotype "got blasted out of the water." Gadd stresses that "we were trying to overcome stereotypes of aging when we went through this process. We wanted to show students that as you age, your life still has purpose and meaning," she says, "while for residents, this project became purpose and meaning—something worth being here for."

The book's title, *We Celebrate Life*, is inspired by Pines Village's mission statement, and the publication continues to bring attention to the community today, as it has over the five years since its release. One example: In 2003, *We Celebrate Life* garnered Pines Village the

Creativity Award from the Indiana Association of Homes and Services for the Aging. Admits Huber, "We never could have achieved what we have by dedicating the same few thousand dollars to the marketing budget that it took to create the book."

In the end, the storytelling project went far further than anyone at Pines Village anticipated. Gadd, who now directs the organization's Meridian Woods community, believes the project's success was due to the commitment and passion she and Huber had for the project. "We truly wanted to show a younger generation that older adults have value," she says. By bringing the generations together, promoting understanding and acceptance of older adults, and breaking down stereotypes of aging, Pines Village's storytelling project and book have done just that. ☺

Jenifer Milner edits the Journal on Active Aging®. Milner, a long-time supporter of the arts, has written articles on the benefits of arts activities in various settings and for different populations. Prior to joining the International Council on Active Aging®, she worked in arts organizations and as an editor.

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Resources

Internet

Dorot

www.dorotusa.org

Florida Intergenerational Orchestra of America

www.flioa.org

Generations United

www.gu.org

International Consortium for Intergenerational Programmes

www.icip.info

Magic Me

www.magicme.co.uk

New Jersey Intergenerational Orchestra

www.njio.org

The Osborn

www.theosborn.org

Pines Village Retirement Communities

www.pinesvillage.org

United Generations Ontario

www.unitedgenerations.ca

UK Centre for Intergenerational Practice

www.centreforip.org.uk