

The Arts, Health and Seniors Project: Part I -- Reporting Out & Starting New

Seniors facing challenges related to vulnerability and marginalization who participated in community-engaged arts programming led by professional artists in Vancouver and North Vancouver showed *“improved physical well-being and higher degrees of social inclusion. Statistically significant improvements [were seen] in three areas: perceived health status, chronic pain, and sense of community.”* (Phinney et al, p 3) The project was designed as a three-year pilot exploration of the relationship between arts and health, and due to positive health outcomes and the project’s popularity, it has continued through its sixth year of program delivery.

In 2009, the project became *The Arts and Health Project: Healthy Aging Through The Arts (AHS)*. The project began to restructure its site sponsorship program in 2011/2012 to create a tenured mentorship initiative with the intent of providing greater access to professionally-led arts programming for seniors across BC. The plan is to select two new sites in 2013 to begin a four year mentorship that will include financial and administrative support, as well as ongoing professional capacity building opportunities. The project entered into an agreement with the BC Recreation and Parks Association as its new fiscal agent in February 2012.

By the end of the planned four-year mentorship, it is anticipated that the sites will be established within their communities and able and willing to secure their own funding while continuing to maintain a professional affiliation with the project through participation in the ongoing Arts and Health Community of Practice. After 2013, the project plans to establish one new site in Vancouver and one new site outside of Vancouver, within BC, each year as funding will allow.

A variation on earlier ground-breaking work by Dr. Gene Cohen, MD & PhD

This project was an outgrowth of the first Canadian Forum on Arts and Health held in Vancouver in March, 2005. A featured speaker at the Forum was Susan Perlstein, a key figure in the American ground-breaking study, *Creativity in Aging*, headed by Dr. Gene Cohen, MD, PhD, former Director of The Center on Aging, Health and Humanities at George Washington University. Inspired by preliminary reports from this study, Forum participants from Vancouver Coastal Health (VCH) and the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation partnered to get initial funding from VCH’s Smart Fund and the Parks Board to undertake a similar program to serve vulnerable seniors. The pilot began program delivery with twelve partners and nine funding organizations.

Between 2006 and 2009, AHS project sites were located in four communities in Vancouver and North Vancouver. In 2009 two additional sites were added and an additional project group added to one of the existing sites. Many of the participating seniors faced some form of barrier or marginalization beyond their

age, including language, stigma related to sexual orientation and/or financial challenges. The majority of participants were women, ranging in age from 55 to 90 years. Fifty-one seniors participated consistently over the three-year period of the initial pilot.

Scope of the pilot

The pilot involved arts-related activities, including:

- Weekly two hour community-engaged arts programs over a



nine month period each year, led by a professional artist, with the support of an artist intern and a seniors' worker;

- Occasional trips to related arts exhibitions/performances at professional galleries and theatres;
- Annual exhibitions and performances of the works created by the seniors in their communities at community and professional venues; and
- An annual year-end showcase, exhibition and get together of participants from all four sites at the Vancouver Roundhouse Community Centre to share their work and celebrate their accomplishments.

In addition, the artists, seniors' workers, and others involved in the pilot created a Community of Practice that met regularly to share experiences, review progress and make adjustments to the pilot.

Challenges and learning experiences for all

Conversations with a seniors' worker (Liza Tam), a lead artist (Claire Robson) and the project coordinator (Margaret Naylor) reveal that for everyone involved in AHS, it has been a learning and challenging experience.

For the participants, AHS provided an opportunity to stretch their concepts of themselves and to try new skills. For many, such as the Asian women in the Strathcona-based group, this meant stepping beyond their cultural desire to please, to avoid mistakes, and to sit quietly and listen to the instructor. In the puppet-making class they stepped dramatically beyond their expected cultural boundaries by sharing their personal stories, not only with members of their group but also in public performances.

For members of the Quirk-e group (Queer Imaging and Riting Kollektive for Elders), it meant mastering the intricacies of the Photoshop program when many had virtually no previous computer experience. It has also meant moving to writing for publication, as they are now on the verge of publishing an industry published anthology of their work.

For both of these groups, it meant meeting each other, people they would never have encountered in their daily lives. The groups hit it off right away, despite the cultural and language differences, the connecting thread being that they each experienced a sense of “other” and being marginalized by society.

For the lead artists, working with the seniors groups within a community-engaged arts practice, meant working WITH the seniors, allowing them to influence the evolution of the work within the workshops. It meant abandoning carefully crafted plans to respond to the seniors’ needs and interests, while also providing opportunities to challenge and inspire them. For Claire, working with the Quirk-e group has been a life changing process. First, it meant learning to let go of control, learning to empower the group, and eventually to appreciate that creating art can be a collective process as well as an individual one. Working with Quirk-e also opened the door to new opportunities. Someone heard about her work and suggested that she should get a PhD, which she did in 2011. She now feels she has been able to integrate many aspects of her personal and professional lives as an artist, an educator, a researcher, and someone who engages in group community art-making.

For Liza, AHS has also meant learning to let go – to let go of thinking she knows what’s best for the seniors and letting them experiment with something new and unknown. It has also meant learning to trust the professional artists, trusting their lead. Margaret pointed out that learning to trust the artist is also something the seniors have to do to really benefit from the program.

Attracting and supporting participants

Attracting participants to some groups has been a challenge as vulnerable seniors are often hesitant to leave familiar physical surroundings or to try new things. Many have also been led to believe they have no artistic talent, can’t draw, can’t sing, etc. Liza focused on the word “health” in the Arts and Health Project participant recruitment. She found that caught seniors’ attention, as they wanted to improve their health and to ease their pain. After the first year, it was all word of mouth as the seniors shared their experiences with friends and performed at seniors’ residences and other public venues.



One of the major benefits for the participants in AHS

has been an enhanced sense of connection and feeling of belonging to a community. In part, this seems to come from the support they give each other artistically, and it also comes from deliberate organization to support one another. For example, in the Quirk-e group, a Circle of Caring was created to help seniors with memory issues remember the dates of the gatherings; to help with transportation; to stay in touch when a member is ill and give them the missed lessons, etc.

As one Quirk-e member, Bill, moved into his eighties, he began to question his contributions to the group. He was also told by the other members that his stories about what it was like to come out of the closet in the 1940's were vitally important. He was paired up with another senior, and together they created a visual memoir of Bill's life. Bill is very proud of the work, and the process of creating it re-energized him. Other participants of Quirk-e have described Bill as a treasure, as he is showing the way for others as they age.

"Participants from Britannia and Strathcona chat", photo by Chris Mann

Thoughts about creating new programs . . .

Margaret and Claire suggest that a diverse group of seniors with a range of abilities and infirmities works well as there are more opportunities for mentorship and support within the group than within a group of seniors all dealing with the same challenges. In a mixed group, the members are able to support one another and draw on the strengths and skills of different ages and abilities.

Margaret stresses that participating seniors become dependent on regular program delivery. Organizers interested in initiating a project should develop a sustainability plan early on that will allow for on-going seniors' art programming. She reports that it can take several years for the seniors to trust the lead artist and the others in their group, as well as to find their voice within their own work. Once this happens, the groups become a very important part of the participating seniors' lives, and they do not want them to come to an end.

For more detail about the major learning from the pilot, see *The Arts, Health and Seniors Project: A Three Year Exploration of the Relationship Between Arts & Health*. Detailed site reports can be found as an appendix to the report, located on the Vancouver Parks Board's website (<http://vancouver.ca/parks/arts/artshealthseniors.htm>).

Watch for the second part of this article by N.J.Cooley, *The Arts, Health and Seniors Project: Part II -- Quantitative vs Qualitative Evaluation Results*.

References

Alison Phinney, PhD,,Mark Pickersgill, MA, Margaret Naylor, MFA, Elaine Moody, MSN, Juan Gabriel Solorzano, MSc,, Jill p. weaving, *The Arts, Health and Seniors Project: A Three Year Exploration of the Relationship Between Arts & Health*, May 2012.