Building Intergenerational Bonds Through the Arts

By Renya Larson

One of humankind's defining traits is intergenerational interdependence. As newborns, people are utterly dependent on the care and instruction of parents, and thus begins our unspoken social compact with other generations. As children, we expect our parents to care for us and our future, and as adults, we expect to give back, caring for our aging parents and our own children and grandchildren.

Unfortunately, this social compact is strained in the United States today. Geographic mobility, shifting family structures, and changes in the economy and workforce have all contributed to a society in which the generations are highly segregated. This article will demonstrate how the arts can be used to build and strengthen intergenerational bonds.

Why Intergenerational Arts Programs?

In past decades, many organizations have developed intergenerational programs that build and strengthen the bonds between old and young. In general, programs fall into three categories: those in which older people serve younger people (for example, tutoring, mentoring, or childcare programs); those in which younger people serve older people (for example, social visits or meal assistance); and those in which older and younger people serve together (for example, raising money for disaster relief or neighborhood beautification).

The Temple University Center for Intergenerational Education in Philadelphia has documented a wide range of benefits for older and younger participants in intergenerational programs. Older participants, for example, experience enhanced life satisfaction, decreased isolation, fulfillment and a sense of meaning, new and meaningful relationships, and new skills and insights. Younger participants experience increased self-esteem and self-worth, improved behavior, increased involvement in school work, and a sense of historical and personal continuity.

The extent to which an individual intergenerational program will lead to these outcomes depends, to some degree, on the design of the program itself. The Temple University Center for Intergenerational Education notes that participants in programs with high levels of engagement (i.e., longer-term programs that foster direct and ongoing contact) are more likely to form strong bonds than participants in programs with a low level of engagement; participants in these programs are also more likely to experience a change in attitudes toward other
age groups, a sense of community, and enhanced self-esteem.

This article will focus on intergenerational arts programs with a high level of engagement. These programs offer all the benefits outlined above, plus several benefits that are intrinsic to artistic interventions. The first benefit is that the arts are holistic. They not only engage the logical mind, but also the senses, the emotions, and the imagination. They allow people to know each other in metaphor, in imagery, in symbolism, in intuition. Second, these programs have tangible goals and outcomes: books, poems, murals, exhibitions, concerts, and performances. A tangible goal gives participants something concrete to strive for and, ultimately, to share with the wider community. Finally, these programs make use of an unlimited resource in both old and young: creative potential. This is not to say that older people and younger people have the same artistic capabilities (for example, most young children have a narrow vocal range because their chords are not as developed as those of older people). It is also not to say that all old and young people have had the opportunity or the inclination to develop artistic skills. But for people of any age, creativity is a birthright. Because each person has a unique creative voice, the arts are an ideal medium for helping older and younger people look beyond their generational stereotypes and know each other (body, mind, and spirit) as individuals.

A SAMPLING OF OUTSTANDING PROGRAMS

Below is a sampling of intergenerational arts programs that provides an overview of the range of existing models, each with its own purposes and outcomes. They have been grouped in the categories mentioned above, according to the primary service goal of the programs. Of course, all participants serve each other in intergenerational programs. For example, even when the primary goal of a program is for older people to serve youth, the older participants will benefit in countless ways—experiencing the heightened self-esteem that comes from serving others, learning more about younger people and their perspectives, and learning more about themselves.

Many of the organizations mentioned here offer multiple intergenerational programs with different goals and outcomes. For more information about specific programs, see contact information below.

ELDERS SERVING YOUTH

Some arts organizations have developed programs with a focus on elders serving youth. For example, some arts organizations have troupes of elder storytellers who enrich social studies and language arts curricula with their real-life stories. In Stagebridge Theatre Company’s program Grandparent Tales (www.stagebridge.org), based in Oakland, California (see article by Kandel, this issue), troupe members bring storybooks to life and develop relationships with students, inspiring them to read and to gather stories from their own grandparents. Similarly, storytellers from Pearls of Wisdom, a program of Elders Share the Arts (www.elderssharethearts.org) in New York City, visit social studies classrooms in order to share their own real-life memories of historical events and eras and cultural and ethnic traditions.

Other organizations have developed programs in which older people immerse younger people in art forms rooted in their culture; elders from the New York City’s Center for Elders and Youth in the Arts (www.aging.org/programs/art/ceya.html), for example, have taught young people traditional art forms (Ukrainian egg painting, for example). The center added an English-as-a-second-language component to this program, further enhancing its educational benefits.

YOUNGER PEOPLE SERVING ELDERS

Across the country, many school districts require community service of their students. Some arts organizations have developed arts programs that give students a chance to enrich the lives of older people in their communities. For example, Elders Share the Arts has developed a visual arts program that reduces the social isolation of frail elders who have difficulty leaving their homes. In Legacy Works, volunteer or professional caregivers (including students who count the program toward their service-learning requirements) are trained to interview elders about the elders’ memories and to share their own. The pairs then create

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together simple works of visual art that depict these memories.

The caregiver assists the older partner when necessary (for example, by cutting or tracing), but more important, the caregiver enters into a dialogue about meaningful life experiences. For many older Legacy Works participants, the program offers their only interpersonal contact outside of medical or custodial care.

**Older and Younger People Serve Together**

As already mentioned, the vast majority of intergenerational arts programs benefit both older and younger participants. Some programs in this category achieve these benefits by highlighting the study of a particular art form. For example, for the past three years, the Center for Elders and Youth in the Arts has held creative writing classes for high school students at assisted living facilities. Their writings compare and contrast a variety of generational topics. While students fulfill their standard curricular requirements, they also have the rare opportunity to grow as writers alongside elder classmates. Similarly, the New Jersey Intergenerational Orchestra ([www.njio.org](http://www.njio.org)), which attracts participants from across the state, strives to build camaraderie between generations through the study and performance of orchestral music. Orchestra members include novices of all ages (they’ve ranged from 6 years old to 90 years old) as well as professionals, who join to serve as mentors.

Sometimes, intergenerational arts programs are developed in response to an urgent and specific social problem. For example, at Penn South, a housing cooperative (one of the oldest housing cooperatives in New York City), older and younger residents were alarmed that the cooperative’s board was considering a bid for privatization. In response, Elders Share the Arts worked with these residents to create an intergenerational mural that celebrated public housing and the unique history of Penn South. Programs in this category can also include those that address ongoing social problems. For example, Full Circle Theater Company (in residence at the Temple University Center for Intergenerational Learning in Philadelphia) has developed intergenerational performances that confront age stereotyping and that enhance conflict-resolution skills and cross-cultural relationships ([www.fullcircletheatre.org](http://www.fullcircletheatre.org)). The theater company has also developed a performance series to promote “healthy choices” for younger audiences (for example, a performance series on smoking prevention) and older audiences (one performance series addressed healthy aging).

In many programs, the social issue that the participants seek to address is their own internalized ageism. While all intergenerational programs have this goal implicitly, some programs make this a more overt and primary focus. These programs most often work by providing older and younger participants an opportunity to share their perspectives and experiences related to themes that are mutually relevant. By doing so, participants move beyond stereotypes and suspicions they may have about the other age group. For example, Roots & Branches Theatre ([roots@jasa.org](mailto:roots@jasa.org)) in New York City brings together a consistent group of elder actors (the “roots”) and student actors from New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts (the “branches”). Over the nine months of the aca-
demic year, the company experiments with storytelling, improvisation, and discussion exercises that are all based on the participants' life experiences. These tape-recorded sessions are transcribed and then developed by a professional playwright into a script. The script eventually becomes a fully mounted production that is performed by the workshop participants. Roots&Branches explores a different theme each year (for example, immigration, beauty, fairy tales). What remains consistent is the recognition that mutual sharing and creation constitute a powerful intergenerational intervention.

As is clear from the example of Roots & Branches, the arts can be an effective medium for exploring and celebrating the life stories of elders and for passing these stories on to the next generation.

While Roots&Branches uses theater as its medium, other artistic media have proved equally rich. For example, Elders' Wisdom, Children's Song is a program of Community Celebrations of Place (www.communitycelebration.org), an organization headquartered in Minneapolis in which senior members of a community talk about their lives and children write songs about what they have learned from the elders. The collectively written works are then featured in large community-wide celebrations that honor the diverse cultures of the United States today. Community Celebrations of Place facilitates dozens of Elders' Wisdom, Children's Song programs throughout the U.S. each year. The organization also provides workshops and summer institutes that train teachers, school administrators, and community members to incorporate intergenerational learning into the fabric of their yearly curriculum.

One of the best-known intergenerational arts organizations in the country is the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange (www.danceexchange.org) of Takoma Park, Maryland (see article by Borstel, this issue). Like Roots&Branches and Community Celebrations of Place, the Dance Exchange creates original performance works addressing a wide variety of topics, often incorporating the life experiences of participants of all ages with an intergenerational cast. Over the course of three decades, the Dance Exchange has created more than seventy-five of these dance

and theater works emphasizing the highest artistic caliber.

Kairos Dance Theater (www.kairosdance.org) also uses the joy of dance to nurture intergenerational sharing and collaboration. In workshops, Kairos explores the intersection of movement and story; weaving back and forth between the participants’ memories and the recreation of these memories in movement. The company, which spans four generations, offers fifteen to twenty public performances a year on a variety of themes.

DEVELOPING INTERGENERATIONAL ARTS PROGRAMS

If you are thinking of developing or enhancing an intergenerational arts program, it will be helpful to keep in mind several key principles.

First, it is important to take the needs of both older and younger participants in mind when designing your program. For example: Is the program meeting in a location that is accessible for older participants who may have difficulty walking? Is the program meeting at a time that is convenient for both the older and the younger participants? Is the goal of the program relevant to both generations? Consideration of needs extends to the art form itself: Are choreographed dance movements appropriate to older dancers and their range of motion? Do very young or very old actors need support in remembering their lines? The goal, of course, is to design a program in which both older and younger performers will feel safe and stimulated. The resulting artwork should celebrate the creative contributions of participants of all ages and levels of physical, cognitive, and emotional development and functioning.

CONCLUSION

This article has outlined the range of intergenerational arts programs that exist today. Taken together, they demonstrate that the arts are indeed a powerful medium for strengthening or rekindling understanding, respect, and mutual caring. More of them are needed.

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