Culture Builds Community: Elders Share the Arts

By Susan Perlstein

In a world where people are continually in a process of defining themselves and their communities, arts programs can be an integral part of building community. In every neighborhood, issues of identity and belonging, of respecting different ages and heritages, and of learning democratic ways demand a public venue. Arts programs bring elders and youth together to learn, create, and change.

Elders Share the Arts (ESTA) is a community-based arts organization that has pioneered programs to create bridges and partnerships between generations. Teaching artists work with old and young people to transform their life stories into dramatic, literate, passionate presentations that celebrate the human condition and community issues. ESTA is dedicated to validating personal histories, honoring diverse traditions, and connecting generations and cultures through “living history arts”—theater, dance, music, writing, and visual arts. Using a unique synthesis of oral history and the creative arts, the staff of professional artists works to transform life stories into presentations and exhibits that celebrate community life. ESTA works in senior centers, schools, nursing homes, and hospitals throughout New York City developing intergenerational arts partnerships. The participants meet once a week for about thirty weeks, creating programs that culminate in celebrations called living history festivals.

Why transform life stories into art? Our experience has shown that intergenerational arts programs can create social change and can have an impact on education and community.

Education

For the participants involved in the artistic process, self-expression is an essential aspect of the learning experience. Each person learns skills, discovers aspects of self, and finds creative ways of expressing perceptions. The art activities teach skills as they encourage self-esteem and a sense of identity and belonging.

For example, in East Harlem, Hispanic youth and elders from Latin American countries created a play and permanent mural called “Our Community Tree.” While making face masks and handprints for the mural, older people and fifth-grade students interviewed each other about where they had come from and what they had brought with them from their country of
origin. In applying oral history techniques, families in the program come to better understand each other and gain insight into their history. One parent credited the program with her child’s more respectful behavior at home. She said that the oral history interviews brought their family closer together. Another parent said, “Every time I walk into the school and see the Community Tree mural, I’m reminded that we are all connected.”

COMMUNITY

Intergenerational art programs emphasize exploring commonalities and differences and learning respect, tolerance, and appreciation through the art form. In this way, these programs empower participants and audience alike. Our living history festivals bring community arts groups together, creating ceremonies in which participants recognize the special place of each generation and their respective cultures. Festivals are public forums that provide a place to come together to see, discuss, share, question, think, and appreciate each other.

In Flushing, Queens, Rosenthal Senior Center was founded with reparations funds to serve immigrant Holocaust survivors, and this group is still the largest at the center. As the population of the neighborhood has changed, with more non-Europeans moving in, these older people have come to feel increasingly disconnected and unsettled. Yet, they hold the keys to valuable stories and memories about how the neighborhood has developed over time. For the past ten years, intergenerational arts programs at the center have offered the elders opportunities to tell their stories, learn new ones, and break out of their isolation to reconnect to the larger community.

Recently, we brought these Eastern European elders together with seventh-grade newcomers from the Pacific Rim to create a play entitled ‘Rights of Passage.’ First, the seniors interviewed each other about the changes that had occurred in the neighborhood. The interviews included remarks such as: “The Koreans should go back where they came from—what makes them think they can take over?” But as soon as the elders got to know the Korean youth in the workshop, they realized these children had the same goals that they had for their own children: to get an education and a job, to be responsible citizens.

SOCIAL CHANGE

Arts are also a tool for social change, capable of creating an institutional shift that can be measured. ESTA’s programs often bring unlikely partners to the table and foster critical thinking, decision making, stretching the imagination, and opening new perspectives together through murals, plays, and writing projects that open up a public discussion. When community arts programs become institutionalized, they can help stabilize communities beset by tensions.

For example, older people in Bushwick Roundtable Senior Center, Brooklyn, have been part of a living history theater group for over ten years. Four years ago, the group decided to extend their commitment to local high schools. They began a community service learning project called “Why Vote?” After sharing their own stories about the civil rights movement, they created a living-history play to make people aware of why voting is important. Public discussions and voter registration followed each performance at local high schools and community colleges. Five hundred youth were registered to vote.

Intergenerational arts programs bridge the gap by their potential to connect people and systems in meaningful, life-giving ways. Incorporating arts partnerships in the community helps to fundamentally change the nature of relationships. Through living-history arts programs, many thousands of unsung Americans, old and young, have found their voices, expressing themselves in a resonant reaffirmation of their life stories and cultural heritage. In doing so, they promote multicultural acceptance and understanding. Today, many inner city neighborhoods lack a cohesive sense of community. Intergenerational arts programs can provide preventative and integrative approaches to building community—healing, connecting, and celebrating life.

Susan Perlstein, M.S.W., is director; Elders Share the Arts’ Center for Creative Aging, New York, N.Y.

Winter 1998–1999