



American
Alliance of
Museums

Museums and Creative Aging: A Healthful Partnership



At the Louisiana State Museum, teaching artist Baba Luther Gray led a course on the influences and rhythms of New Orleans music. Courtesy: Louisiana State Museum

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Foreword by Aroha Philanthropies

As the nation's leading funder of and advocate for creative aging programs, Aroha Philanthropies applauds the American Alliance of Museums for producing this report on creative aging and combating ageism, the first of its kind.



It couldn't come at a better time. Within fifteen years, and for the first time in history, Americans older than sixty-five will outnumber those younger than eighteen. People are living lives that are not only longer but healthier, and contrary to popular belief, the vast majority of these older adults remain cognitively fit and eager to live fully. Ageism, however, has limited our ability to see the opportunities presented by this massive demographic shift.

Creative aging programs, which empower older adults to learn an artform in a socially supportive setting, are one of the many powerful ways to address this new reality. Across the country, museums and other cultural and senior-serving institutions have stepped up to provide new arts learning opportunities with older adults in mind. Some have made major contributions to the lives of older adults by developing virtual, online programs during the pandemic, helping to alleviate the damaging social isolation experienced by many older adults.

Aroha began funding creative aging programs in 2013, and the museums we've supported have achieved extraordinary results for the participants and organizations alike. Again and again, program participants say they have created strong new friendships, found connections to community, enhanced their creativity, and rediscovered their passion for learning and creating. High-quality programs like these empower older adults to tap previously unknown potential, enhance their sense of purpose, and find joy in new pursuits.

It's time for America's museums—with their longtime commitment to education for youth and their essential relationships with older adults as visitors, volunteers, advocates, and trustees—to take a fresh approach to the experiences they offer people fifty-five and better.

Museums can and must venture beyond their own walls—physical and metaphorical—to develop strong, lasting community relationships, especially with those who have been overlooked as intelligent, contributing members of society: older adults.

This capstone report, with its thorough analysis, clear call to action, and practical, timely advice, lays out an exciting road ahead for museums that choose to heed its call.

It's time to lead, with creativity, collaboration, respect, and risk. Museums, the next step is yours.

Ellen A. Michelson
Founder and President
Aroha Philanthropies

Teresa Bonner
Executive Director
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Foreword by American Alliance of Museums

The COVID-19 pandemic and events of the past year have accelerated and amplified many existing societal challenges, particularly those in the areas of diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion (DEAI). Among those crucial challenges is that as people age, they are often pushed to the margins of society.

This marginalization, which impoverishes us all, must be addressed through various avenues, including arts and culture. Extensive research shows the transformative effect that arts engagement can have on health and aging, but we face a cruel paradox. As people age, they often have both more time and increased desire for creative outlets, but fewer opportunities to meet these needs.



Museums have an important role to play in serving this growing segment of the public. Starting in 2018, the American Alliance of Museums and Aroha Philanthropies launched an innovative partnership to encourage museums to tackle this challenge on two levels. As trusted and influential institutions, museums can help change the narrative about what it means to grow old in America, combat ageism, and promote a healthy change in societal attitudes toward aging. Turning that lens inward, museums can improve their own intergenerational competency, and identify what they can do to serve the overlooked needs of the oldest segments of their communities.

This work is of particular importance in 2021, as the pandemic deprives older adults of activities that bring them joy and belonging. The physical isolation required for safety exacerbates social isolation, inflicting its own damage on physical and mental health. But over the past year, even as they had to close to the public, museums across the country rose to the challenge, providing respite, relief, and sources of connection for older adults.

At the leading edge of this effort was a cadre of twenty museums already engaging older adults through creative aging workshops. With funding from Aroha Philanthropies and training provided by Lifetime Arts, these museums, participants in the Seeding Vitality Arts in Museums (SVA) program, were providing high-quality, intensive arts programming to people over the age of fifty-five. As the pandemic prevented in-person interactions, educators at the SVA museums reached out by phone, email, and digital Zoom meetings to provide social connection and meaningful experiences to a segment of the public that has been disproportionately harmed by the COVID-19 crisis.

In 1963, The New School for Social Research launched the first “lifelong learning institute” to provide educational experiences for retired people. Today, it is widely recognized that learning is not confined to formal primary and secondary education but is a valued and valuable experience throughout life. Museums spend more than two billion dollars each year on education activities for the youngest segment of our society and devote three-quarters of their education budget to K-12 students. Collectively, museums receive approximately fifty-five million visits each year from students in school groups.

Education should not stop once we leave the classroom. By the year 2035, there will be more people [over the age of sixty-five](#) in the United States than [children seventeen and younger](#)—together these two age cohorts will constitute more than half of the country’s population. How could it transform museums, and society, if elders were as valued as schoolchildren when it comes to supporting learning?

Museums could be the educational constant of American life, providing engaging, immersive, self-directed learning opportunities for the oldest as well as the youngest. They could be the social glue of our increasingly fragmented society as well, building connections between the generations.

I am so pleased that the museum historian and scholar Marjorie Schwarzer agreed to author this capstone report. She brings a deep understanding of the history and culture of the museum field to bear on this exploration of how museums are integrating age equity into their core competencies, and creative aging into their public service.

On behalf of the Alliance, my thanks to Aroha Philanthropies for championing the cause of creative aging; for generously sharing their experience, research, and wisdom with museums; and for their support of the Alliance in our joint endeavors.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Laura L. Lott". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Laura" and last name "Lott" clearly distinguishable.

Laura L. Lott

President and CEO, American Alliance of Museums

Introduction

Have some spunk and get up and go! Make art. Dance. Sing. Learn something new. Be with different people. Stay creative. You don't have a clue about what you can do, until you do it.

—Eighty-eight-year-old participant in a creative aging dance performance at Museo de Historia, Antropología y Arte of the University of Puerto Rico

During the darkest moments of the COVID-19 pandemic, as the older adults who were most vulnerable to the virus hunkered down in isolation, a movement filled with hope and light came of age. Inside homes around the nation, on makeshift workstations atop kitchen and dining room tables, across computer screens and cell phones, people over the age of fifty-five from all walks of life joined together. They had heeded the call of a few pioneering museum educators: carve out some space, log in, sign up, click “Join Meeting,” and make art. From Puerto Rico to Alaska, from Louisville to Los Angeles, these older adults¹ collectively transformed the private worlds of their walls and windowsills, their countertops and carpets, into joyous places of artistic expression.

They mixed paint colors and choreographed dances; they stretched, sketched, and stitched. Using their own imaginations to augment the technology, supplies, and curricula delivered by the museums, they wrote poetry, filled sketchbooks, and penned memoirs.

They designed journals, tapestries, and collages. They belted out songs in harmony (and sometimes off-key, but who cares?). Perhaps most importantly, they listened to each other, gave supportive feedback, and shared a good laugh or two. Through all of this activity, these older adults formed new friendships: what one participant described as “a sense of joy and camaraderie,” and another called “an amazing opening up” of her world.



The Heard Museum in Phoenix taught online creative aging courses in weaving. In this photo: Zoom shots of the students by Samantha Toledo. Courtesy: The Heard Museum

These experimental classes didn't come out of thin air, nor were they one-offs. The momentum for museum-sponsored creative aging programming has been building for years, even before the pandemic. In 2018, the American Alliance of Museums and Aroha Philanthropies inaugurated "Seeding Vitality Arts in Museums" (SVAM). The partnership intends to call attention to the talents, insights, and resilience of people over the age of fifty-five and build museums' onsite capacity to develop and deliver free-of-charge (or low-cost) art courses specially designed for them. This mandate broadened after museums' COVID-19 closures. The result of both the onsite and online classes has been, in the words of Susan Isken of Craft Contemporary in Los Angeles, "a beautiful way of bringing older adults back into the fold...keeping our citizens productive and creatively engaged in life."

Developing creative aging programs and rejecting stereotypes about older people makes sense for the museum sector both strategically and ethically. From a strategic perspective, people over the age of fifty-five of all races and ethnicities are a growing constituency. They comprise 21 percent of the US population, and that percentage is increasing as American society ages. [By 2035, there will be more adults over the age of sixty-five](#) living in the US than children. Older people are more educated than any prior generation and control almost 70 percent of the nation's wealth. These trends present museums with unmined opportunities in educational programming, audience development, and fundraising.

As mission-based humanistic organizations, museums also have an ethical imperative to embrace the creative aging movement. The World Health Organization views ageism as a growing public health crisis that impacts communities on every continent and in every nation. Older Americans of all races and backgrounds are not immune. Many suffer from exclusionary practices that lead to social isolation, and over half report moderate-to-severe loneliness, conditions which lead to health issues like cognitive decline and higher risk of mortality. Older people who volunteer or enroll in educational programs, however, challenge themselves to learn new things and remain active outside of the home, developing stronger

There is something very exciting about working with older adults in a museum setting. They bring such an incredible wealth of knowledge and are eager to learn. They are so honest about what they want and whether they're getting it.

—Sara Lowenburg, Manager of Education, Louisiana State Museum, New Orleans

social networks and greater self-confidence. Medical and psychological studies correlate these experiences with increased health and wellbeing. In other words, museums have a significant opportunity to engage a population that is growing not only in number, but also in need of the kinds of creative and social environments that are museums' hallmarks. As Anchorage Museum educator Molissa Udevitz, a contributor to this report, says, "Museums can make a difference right now in the lives of older Americans."

Museums currently face many urgent financial and social challenges, from the economic shock of COVID-19 to the critical dialogues underway about institutional racism, decolonization, and climate change. Why, then, you may be asking, should they add creative aging to their already full agendas? Aren't museums already amply serving people over the age of fifty-five, especially those who are white? Shouldn't they focus on diversifying their offerings to appeal to younger and more diverse populations who will become the audiences and workforce of the future?

The answers to these questions turn out to be not so simple. Data about the arts and culture participation of older people reveals that museums are overlooking a large opportunity for community engagement and intergenerational dialogue². While it may seem anecdotally that on a busy weekday museums' galleries are filled with older white people, data reveals that older people are actually the least likely, among the different age groups, to visit museums and participate in their educational programming. Fieldwide surveys conducted by both the National Endowment for the Arts and



Data story courtesy of
Susie Wilkening

Older Americans are not as loyal to museums as the sector may like to believe. Their loyalty to any organization—be it a restaurant, social club, or cultural institution—is not so different than that of other age groups. Like all people, older visitors and volunteers know when they are being treated dismissively or taken for granted. Therefore, museums need to develop ways to better attract, serve, and retain them as part of their overall audiences. This potential audience has time on its hands (especially retirees) and tends to be mobile, active, curious, and—most importantly—open to learning something new. **Museums have an opportunity to position themselves as places for older people to seek out meaningful social connections, rediscover a sense of purpose, and engage in joyful experiences.**

[LaPlaca Cohen](#) suggest that only 17 percent of those over the age of fifty-five visit a museum at least once a year. By contrast, adults under the age of fifty-five are three times more likely to visit a museum at least once a year. Even older visitors who attend museums frequently desire more programming that is targeted to their needs. "They are actually underserved," says audience researcher Susie Wilkening.³

These strategic and ethical imperatives extend beyond audience development and educational programming. An even more complicated picture emerges when we examine ageism through the racism and other longstanding exclusionary practices museums are currently confronting in their institutional cultures. Museum visitors, volunteers, and professional workers are predominantly white—especially older ones. At the same time, museums are working hard to



Retirees donate thousands of hours every year to museums to give back to their communities. The Oakland Museum of California's annual White Elephant Sale, a fundraising event run entirely by local volunteers, raises millions of dollars for museum programming. Courtesy of Oakland Museum of California, Odell Hussey Photography.

engage and become more relevant to a younger, more diverse audience and workforce. Against this backdrop of racial reckoning, ageist stereotypes about each generation's skills, abilities, values, and communication styles are on the rise.

"One of our biggest issues in the workforce in relation to diversity, equity, access, and inclusion (DEAI) is multigenerational," says Ayanna Reed, Chief Human Resource Officer at Oakland Museum of California and President of the Northern California branch of the National Association of African Americans in Human Resources. "People of all ages and backgrounds need to have tools to work together positively and productively. We need to be able to talk to and understand each other." To

help bridge communication gaps and reposition themselves at the forefront of intergenerational dialogue, museums would benefit both ethically and strategically from integrating anti-ageism work into their DEAI initiatives, not only on behalf of their visitors but within their boards, staffs, and volunteer corps.

Since the early 2000s, the creative aging movement has worked to harness the arts to promote healthy aging, improve the lives of older people, and create a counternarrative to ageism. Museums of all types are in a unique position to partner with this growing movement, not only through offering more targeted programming but in reexamining every aspect of their operations.

Executive Summary

Museums are public-facing institutions that exist for the sharing of ideas, creative processes, and wisdom across and between diverse cultures, communities, and generations. This report advocates three interconnected strategies for the field that build on this foundational mission as well as the successes of the Seeding Vitality Arts in Museums initiative:

- 1 Invest in a diverse array of onsite and online programs** that encourage healthy and active aging, a practice known as “creative aging.”
- 2 Work actively to combat society’s prejudices toward older people**, an issue known as “ageism.”
- 3 Foster new kinds of research and partnerships** that can advance these goals.

The aim of the report is to advance museums’ understanding of the interrelated issues of creative aging and ageism and suggest ways that cultural institutions can actively support older people. It does this through the five chapters and supplemental appendices that follow.

The first chapter, titled “Aging and Ageism in American Society,” presents demographic data on aging and ties this data to the global issue of ageism, a pervasive form of prejudice with tragic long-term social, health, and economic consequences. Ageism harms everyone but disproportionately impacts women, people of color, and LGBTQ+ people.⁴ Marginalizing older people, no matter their race, background, or

socioeconomic situation, has led to an epidemic of social isolation. Loneliness is linked to declines in physical and mental health and increased stress on families and caregivers. Ageism isn’t confined to people who are retired. It is also prevalent in the workplace, leading to decreased productivity and increased behavior that perpetuates negative stereotypes about older people. These stresses became more acute during the COVID-19 pandemic and crystalized the need to turn ageism on its head. Are there ethical ways to approach the public health and social challenges our aging population faces? What role can museums play, both through their programmatic offerings and internal workplace practices?

The second chapter of this report, titled “Positive Aging,” discusses initiatives that have been formulated to “replace the ageist cultural narrative...with one that recognizes older age as a season of learning, creativity and vitality.”⁵ Positive aging grew out of the field of [positive psychology](#), a term coined by psychologist Abraham Maslow in the 1950s, and research by scientists that correlates positive thinking with wellness and longevity. It emphasizes the importance of being active and finding joy in life. Two worldwide initiatives that seek to make a positive difference in older people’s lives are discussed in this section: **age-friendly communities**, which develop resources and policies to help people age in place, and **creative aging**, which uses the arts to nurture connection and deep engagement.

Chapter two concludes with a detailed account of **Seeding Vitality Arts in Museums**.⁶ This innovative creative aging demonstration project took place from 2018 to 2021 and has been the largest fieldwide project to date to test and develop educational programming based on the principles of healthy and positive aging. Through Seeding Vitality Arts in Museums, a cohort of twenty museums received funds, training, and ongoing support to create and pilot sequential participatory onsite (and, during COVID, online) artmaking programs for older adults.

Creative aging programs require specialized expertise and teaching strategies that differ from traditional museum educational methods. Museum education typically focuses on actively engaging children and supporting their caregivers and teachers. Programming for older adults, on the other hand, tends to rely on passive viewing and listening. The Seeding Vitality Arts in Museums classes upturned this pattern. They were highly participatory experiences, emphasizing social connection, dialogue, and sustained engagement through challenging assignments meant to build students' skills. As one SVAM participant said, in a furniture design course at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, "This was about more than creating a work of art."⁷

The diverse offerings covered a range of artistic practices—like creative movement, poetic expression, and even the art of drag—and culminated in events held at museums around the nation. The sequential courses were a resounding success. They tapped into a pent-up demand for high-quality participatory arts experiences targeted to older people. Many were oversubscribed and garnered waitlists. "If we had had the resources and the space, we could have offered many more classes and filled them on the spot," said Steve Bennett of the Union County Historical Society and Museum in New Albany, Mississippi.

Participants reported new social connections, friendships, and increased involvement with the host

museums. Demand grew exponentially during the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in a pivot to online creative aging classes that brought with it surprising benefits with large resonance for the museum field.

The third chapter presents case studies from five institutions. They document an array of inspiring projects and point to some of the key lessons learned from the Seeding Vitality Arts in Museums initiative.⁸ (Links to additional case studies are provided in Appendix C.)

- Lisa Ortega-Pol from the **Museo de Historia, Antropología y Arte of the University of Puerto Rico** describes how the small museum where she serves as an educator dealt with the overwhelming demand for its SVAM-sponsored creative writing workshops, as well as the logistics of pulling together programs for older adults at a museum operating on a college campus.
- Toya Northington from the **Speed Art Museum in Louisville, Kentucky**, documents how creative aging intersects with DEAI initiatives at her museum, and how she addressed issues of racial equity and reconciliation within a creative aging curriculum.
- Molissa Udevitz's contribution about the "Vitality and Creativity" series at the **Anchorage Museum in Anchorage, Alaska**, shows how incorporating the museum's extensive Native Alaskan and Arctic collections led to new partnerships, both with the community and within the museum.
- The fourth case study, written in collaboration with Mary Helen Reuter, Britt Patterson Weber, and Jennifer Reed of the **Naples Botanical Garden in Florida**, describes how the NBG's workshop series on nature journaling inspired deep and lasting levels of social engagement through icebreakers and exercises developed especially for older adults.
- Likewise, the final case study describes how



In 2019, teen interns at the de Young Museum collaborated on a creative aging project with Ruth's Table, a non-profit art studio located within the Bethany Center Senior living facility. Photo by Samantha Sanders.

sequential learning courses in pottery at the **Union County Historical Society and Museum in New Albany, Mississippi**, sparked new friendships in a small town where older people are surprisingly isolated from one another.

The fourth chapter synthesizes “Lessons Learned” from the Seeding Vitality Arts in Museums initiative and emphasizes that museums offering sequential creative aging classes shouldn’t rush into the game without careful planning, research, and staff development. Organizations need to build capacity strategically in order to test different approaches and make sure their spaces are accessible and welcoming to older individuals. Key suggestions for developing creative aging programs are to:

- Start small
- Be creative
- Leverage the museum’s unique assets
- Market proactively
- Invest in a culminating social event
- Prepare physical and virtual spaces

This section concludes by offering further recommendations for helping older people get the most out of newer technologies. These lessons and concrete tips for success can be applied to other kinds of creative aging programs.

The final chapter of this report is presented as “A Call to Action for the Future.” It offers recommendations and specific ways that museums can:

- Incorporate creative aging into their institutional planning and expand the scope of creative aging programming
- Commit to anti-ageism as part of diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion (DEAI) initiatives and enact anti-ageist human resources practices
- Seek partners to assist in seeding an intergenerational future for museums

By better understanding and incorporating creative aging initiatives into their organizations, the museum field has a win-win opportunity to contribute to healthy and positive aging while fostering intergenerational and intersectional understanding that will serve future generations.

1

Aging and Ageism in American Society

We are privileged to live at this time of a revolution in longevity. It will be a tragedy for humanity if we mess it up.⁹

— Dr. Alexandre Kalache

America's population is aging. But what does that really mean? People are always aging. Aging is a “biological manifestation of living”¹⁰ that happens to everyone who is alive. You are older now than you were when you started to read this paragraph, and will continue to age whether you keep reading it or not. Yet there is more to aging than every individual's inevitable march through time. What happens when we consider “the biological manifestation of living” as a collective process impacted by society and institutions? The disciplines of demographics, economics, psychology, and public policy have all examined this question.

The Demographics of An Aging Population

According to the [latest US Census data](#), over seventy million, or 21 percent, of the nation's 330 million inhabitants are over the age of fifty-five. The older population is not only growing in size, but is skewed by gender, race, and geography. Over half of older Americans (55 percent) identify as female, which means there are more older women than men. Three-quarters of older Americans (75 percent) are white. This means there are three older white people for every older person of color, which isn't surprising given post-World-War-II birthrates and immigration trends from that era. Also not surprising is that the state with the largest number of older residents is Florida, long a destination for retirees. Beyond Florida, the geography of aging differs by race: Asian American elders tend to live in the states of California, Hawaii, and New York; there are significant populations of Latinx elders in Texas; and the states of Pennsylvania, Montana, and upper New England (Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont) have large populations of older white residents in proportion to younger people of color. But all of these statistics are at a tipping point.¹¹

Within the white population, fertility rates have been falling while longevity has been rising. At the same time, communities of color have experienced higher birthrates as well as a rise in immigration. This means that the **US is coming upon two converging demographic milestones. By 2035 [there will be more adults over the age of sixty-five living in the country than children](#). At the same time, a younger, more diverse cohort is coming of age; by 2045, [the majority of the US population will be people of color](#).** The confluence of this demographic data has significant implications for every facet of society, including museums. What kinds of strategic adjustments will museums need to make to their programming and overall operations in order to remain relevant to society? How will museums fulfill their foundational aim of bridging generations and using their resources to help people of all ages and backgrounds develop empathy and mutual trust, appreciation, and understanding?

More elders are alive today than ever before, and society has an unprecedented opportunity to gain from the accumulated knowledge of such a large corpus of older people.¹² Museums should be especially open to this unique kind of living history.

After all, they are in the business of collecting, interpreting, sharing, and imparting stories about the human experience. Older people's perceptions and recollections can help fill gaps in an institution's knowledge about its collections, exhibitions, architecture, and past administrative decisions. Museums that commemorate and interpret twentieth-century events—from historical events like wars to innovations in technology, music, and art—would do well to take advantage of older peoples' stories and memories.

On the other hand, older white Americans have long controlled the historical narrative, while younger people of color are in the process of establishing a deeper narrative more reflective of the nation's diversity and their elders' contributions. This bifurcation leads to uncomfortable tensions in the museum sector. Is it possible to honor founders' and older peoples' past contributions and at the same time apply contemporary insights that aim to redress past mistakes? Can older board members, collectors, staff, volunteers, and visitors share power in an equitable and respectful way with younger constituents? If museums regard these questions as opportunities for dialogue, there are hopeful possibilities here for constructive intergenerational reckoning, reconciliation, and healing that will not only advance institutional missions but society as a whole.

In addition to the philosophical and strategic tensions institutions face in light of this profound demographic shift, it's also important to note the economic and public health forecasts tied to the aging of the American population. A rising percentage of older people—especially retirees living on pensions and Social Security—increases the nation's "old age dependency ratio," the proportion of retirees to working-age adults. Today, there are about three-and-a-half working-age adults for every retirement-age person. By 2060, [this is expected to fall to two-and-a-half working-age adults for every older person eligible for Social Security](#), auguring an urgent need for improvements in the health care system. How will the

aging of the population impact the lives of younger generations? What will happen to the "sandwich generation" of working people who simultaneously care for younger children and older parents?

While these worries are legitimate, the hyperbolic terms used to discuss them (like "old age dependency ratio" and "silver tsunami") result in false stereotypes that older people are unable or unwilling to contribute to their communities, feeding into society's ages-old punishing attitudes toward our elders. For example, a [Yale University study](#) found that people over the age of sixty are routinely denied access to health care treatments, including clinical trials, because of their age. The [same researchers](#) calculated that reducing age discrimination in the rationing of health care would not only improve patients' health, but save up to sixty-three billion dollars a year in emergency and other later interventions.

There is a clear need for wider awareness of the costs of ageism from the perspectives of both money and human dignity. And yet, according to the World Health Organization, "Ageist attitudes are rampant in every corner of society."¹³

Ageism: A Pervasive Social Issue

A deep and profound prejudice against the elderly is found to some degree in all of us.

— Robert N. Butler, Founding Director, National Institute on Aging

In the late 1960s, Robert N. Butler, Founding Director of the [National Institute on Aging](#), coined the term "ageism" to express how prejudices work against people as they age. This was an era when policymakers were aiming to pass legislation and develop programs that would increase the well-being and economic security of the older Americans who were being pushed aside by the baby boomer generation.¹⁴ One accomplishment of this era was the [The Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967](#); another was [The Employment Retirement Income](#)

[Security Act \(ERISA\) of 1974](#), which set, for the first time in American history, minimum standards to protect individuals' retirement and health plans.

Despite these policy gains, Americans in subsequent generations have continued to exclude, undervalue, and demean older people, fueled by gerontophobia—a fancy word for the fear or hatred of older people. If society doesn't confront its persistent ageism, future generations will be next in line to experience the negative effects that afflict their elders today.

This situation in the US is, unfortunately, not unique. We should be celebrating the fact that, around the world, people are living longer. Yet, within our contemporary society of global upheaval and migration, changing intergenerational family dynamics, and unequal access to resources, the World Health Organization (WHO) has declared ageism to be a worldwide public health crisis. WHO has launched public relations campaigns in Asia, Europe, and [Africa](#) to raise awareness of the situation, especially for women.

Ageism and Gender

Older women suffer disproportionately from ageism. This is in part because of biology—women have a [longer life expectancy](#) than men, meaning that they have more time to experience ageism. But it is also because we live in a society that privileges youthful-looking women. Older women often feel less “seen,” no matter how hard they try to look “well-preserved.” Cosmetic companies and plastic surgeons aggressively market to these insecurities with anti-wrinkle potions containing “miracle” ingredients and procedures that will nip, tuck, plump, and smooth everything else. Highly skilled and educated women face other humiliations as they age. When they are still in the workforce, they are pressured to take measures to appear younger, like dyeing their hair. When they leave the workforce, they are likely to be



The Olana Partnership's plein air painting course “Young at HeART” in Hudson, New York, drew inspiration from Hudson River school landscape artist Frederic Church. Photo by M. Molinski. Courtesy: The Olana Partnership.

poorer than men, having earned less money during their work lives. Many retired professional women have trouble adjusting after leaving the workforce. They lack role models, a road map, and outlets for their skills and energies.

Today's LGBTQ+ elders face [additional struggles](#). They came of age with no access to the institutions—like specialized health care or marriage—that traditionally support people through life's stages. Many were disowned by their families. Those who lived through the late-twentieth-century AIDS epidemic may have lost close friends and partners. For these reasons and others, older people in the LGBTQ+ community have a higher tendency to live alone, isolated from relatives and without access to support systems.¹⁵ This leaves

them especially vulnerable to a public health crisis that is related to ageism: the loneliness epidemic. “Being queer in society is an intensely lonely experience,” says Eli Burke, Education Director at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tucson. “We need to treat seniors as productive members of society and create settings where they can interact with each other and younger generations in a way that honors their life’s experiences. This will help everyone to be less vulnerable and lonely.”¹⁶

Through their volunteer programs and other kinds of educational classes and programs that are discussed in this report, museums have an opportunity to cultivate mutually beneficial relationships between the older women and LGBTQ+ people most impacted by ageism. This is not to say that they should neglect outreach to older straight, cisgender men. While they may not face the same ageist challenges as others, older men overall are still [at high risk of social isolation](#), especially those who are not engaged with social activities outside of family, according to a recent study released by the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Museums benefit from the skills and perspectives of older people of all genders and sexualities, while offering elders a sense of community and social connection.

Social Isolation and the Loneliness Epidemic

Even before the isolation brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly two-thirds of American adults of all ages described themselves as lonely, a destructive emotion associated with feeling hollow, frustrated, and bored.¹⁷ This phenomenon is often intensified in older adults—almost half of people over the age of sixty-five report being moderately to severely lonely. The reasons are many. Older people are often isolated from others. They may be the primary caregivers for sick spouses, or they may be ill themselves. They may be widowed, divorced, or live alone with no family ties or friends—a situation that is more prevalent for

women, especially those who are white or African American.¹⁸ They may no longer be in the workforce and thus have no social affiliations beyond their former job. Earlier generations of older people might have turned to the built-in communities provided by religious organizations, but now only about 25 percent of Americans over the age of fifty regularly attend religious services.¹⁹ All of these factors amount to a lack of engagement with the larger world, which leads to loneliness.

There is value to spending time alone. But being alone by choice and being starved for human conversation, touch, and connection are two different psychological states. Solitude can bring moments of great peace and insight; inconsolable loneliness, on the other hand, triggers [a stress response that may impact the immune system](#) and lead to depression, hypertension, loss of appetite, and insomnia. [A recent study out of Oxford University](#) found loneliness to be as damaging to human health as obesity and smoking fifteen cigarettes a day.

These dangers of loneliness are worse for older people.²⁰ When seniors are moderately or severely lonely, their [risk of developing clinical dementia increases by 40 percent](#). Their risk of [premature death increases by 50 percent](#). Their risk of succumbing to [elder abuse](#) also increases. Desperate for human companionship, lonely older adults might put up with physical, verbal, or financial abuse. Starved for a conversation with another human, they might answer a phishing call and fall for an unscrupulous financial scam designed to profit off the loneliness epidemic.

The human and financial costs of loneliness are so great that in 2011, a charity in the United Kingdom launched a [Campaign to End Loneliness](#). Twenty-eight service organizations devised, implemented, and evaluated “loneliness interventions” for older adults, including helplines, support groups, and befriending services. Although museums were not central to these projects, museum professionals will be pleased to learn that [an evaluation report](#) showed that a third

of older people who experience loneliness coped by visiting a public place—such as a museum. This is all the more reason for museums to intentionally create programs that can provide the social connections that are vital to a healthy life. Museums are in a unique position to help alleviate loneliness by engaging people of all ages in meaningful activities that offer a sense of purpose and opportunities to build satisfying relationships with others.

The Workplace: A Multigenerational Arena for Reducing Ageism

When a plurality or even a visible minority of people in one setting or profession become insensitive to the essential humanity of others, the culture itself is unwell.²¹

— Louise Aronson, author of *Elderhood: Redefining Aging, Transforming Medicine, Reimagining Life*

Ageism and gerontophobia occur everywhere: on the streets, in restaurants, on public transportation, in supermarket lines, and anywhere else you can think of. According to the [American Association of Retired Persons](#), this includes the American workplace, where the majority of workers over fifty-five say they have either seen or experienced ageism. The workplace still tolerates derogatory remarks about an older person's age that it no longer will about someone's race, gender, or disability.²² Examples include remarking to a co-worker that surely they must be ready to retire, or referring to them as a "fixtured," "fossil," or "dinosaur"—ageist terms that seem especially ironic in the museum workplace. Most workers aren't aware that expressions like this are not only hurtful and ageist but qualify as workplace harassment or bullying.

Other ageist workplace practices are not only illegal, but unfairly impact older employees' finances. These

might include a layoff, demotion, or reduction in hours designed to "give an opportunity to someone younger," or a wage freeze based on the assumption that "a younger person needs the money more." Older workers are sometimes even accused of using too much of their earned sick time because of ailments linked to their ages. This discrimination against older workers is reminiscent of the private sector's "long and ugly history of keeping women and people of color out," says the cultural historian Lawrence R. Samuel.²³

Age discrimination against older people persists because workplaces, including museums, tend to assume that older professionals can't learn new technologies, don't understand or won't accept organizational restructuring, clog up the works with antiquated ideas and attitudes, and are less skilled or open-minded than their younger counterparts. But these stereotypes simply aren't true. Study after study shows that workers over the age of fifty-five score higher in job skills inventories that involve "detail-oriented tasks, organization, listening, writing skills and problem solving" than their younger colleagues.²⁴ They also "tend to be more reliable on the job, as well as more patient," according to anti-ageism activist Ashton Applewhite. For these reasons, older workers possess skills and perspectives that are necessary for organizational productivity.²⁵ "Older people are more resilient in times of change than younger people," says Paul Irving of the [Milken Institute's Center for the Future of Aging](#). This quality of resiliency adds to an organization's day-to-day functioning and long-term sustainability.

This is not to defend all older workers. There will always be people who resist change, have an inflated sense of their own worth, shrug off new ideas by saying, "We already tried that, and it didn't work," or who, in the words of Applewhite, "[lack] the capacity to see circumstances and process information within an 'integrated whole.'"²⁶ Studies of workplace ageism acknowledge the fomenting anger and rebellion against what has been called the "gerontocracy," that is, institutions (like museums) controlled by the

attitudes and behaviors of older, usually white, people. This phenomenon is part of why the field has recently witnessed the forced resignations of [long-time curators](#) and [directors](#) accused of racism. Educators and other museum staff have also documented tensions [between younger staff of color and older white volunteers](#).

Gretchen Jennings, a member of the [MASS Action](#) collaborative promoting equitable and inclusive museum practices, cautions against conflating ageism with a critique of older museum professionals who are insensitive to coworkers and visitors on the basis of race, sexual orientation, disability, or any other reason. Jennings and many others in the field recommend that older workers and volunteers receive DEAI counseling and retraining along with other staff. If they are let go, no matter their loyalty or length of service, it should not be due to their age but to their lack of competence in the current workplace.

Though the workplace is rampant with ageism, it is nonetheless an ideal setting for acknowledging and combatting the problem, because it calls on different generations to interact together in productive ways. A positive workplace supports diverse people across different age groups and encourages everyone to work together toward a common goal. It also acknowledges what some [younger staff call “reverse ageism,”](#) dismissive treatment from older co-workers based on their age. Combatting these tendencies to judge people by their age will require training for both older and younger workers in intergenerational and intersectional collaboration. But it’s well worth the effort. Respectful relationships between skilled and energetic colleagues of all backgrounds and ages will lead organizations toward higher morale and increased efficiency and productivity.

A case in point is the role that older workers played during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in health care and public health data management. In the early months of the crisis, retired medical and technology workers joined return-to-work programs because of the urgent demand for their skills, including

knowledge of outdated software systems. Employers were pleasantly surprised by a long list of positive qualities that these elders brought with them beyond fluency in ancient computer languages: “institutional knowledge, education, work experience, mature perspective, stable life stage, dedication, loyalty, and an energy and enthusiasm about returning to work.”²⁷

These attributes have led some private corporations in need of talent to develop “returnships” and “360 mentoring programs.” Returnships, relatives of internships, reintegrate top-level older talent back into the workplace through professional development sessions, cohort models, and mentoring support from younger employees. They may be a way to bring seasoned professionals with valuable skills back into organizations that have undergone substantial downsizing during COVID-19 and need to get back up to speed. Similarly, 360 mentorships veer from the traditional top-down tutelage between an experienced and entry-level employee toward peer-to-peer sharing between older and younger staff. They can be especially valuable for older people who are pursuing a second post-retirement career (sometimes called an “encore career”) in the nonprofit sector and can benefit from learning about that sector’s institutional culture, mission-related values, and aspirations.

Ageism during COVID-19

An aging population. A culture that views older people, especially those who are female and/or LGBTQ+, as a burden. A society that stomachs elder abuse and rations seniors’ health care. An epidemic of social isolation and loneliness. A workplace that tolerates ageism.

Social service, arts, and health care providers have long been aware of how these conditions threaten the nation’s social fabric. In the US, the COVID-19 pandemic stretched these social divides to the breaking point.

Before the pandemic hit, many older people were already vulnerable to social isolation and loneliness



Intergenerational artmaking in action at Ruth's Table in San Francisco. This program was developed by teen interns at the de Young Museum. Photo by Samantha Sanders.

because of a lack of stimulation and learning opportunities targeted to their needs. When the COVID-19 lockdown began, the situation was exacerbated. Just when they were needed most, many programs targeted to older audiences were forced to cancel. Even elders with active social calendars were suddenly isolated and alone.

The public discourse and media reports didn't help. They exposed our nation's ageism at its rawest level, pitting young against old. The flashpoint, a report published by the [Stanford Social Innovation Review](#) explains, was the debate about the economic benefits of reopening businesses versus high mortality rates for older people who would be disproportionately impacted by resultant outbreaks. As it became apparent that people over the age of sixty-five accounted for 80 percent of the deaths from COVID-19 (and that people of color were disproportionately impacted as well), many young people were angered by the shelter-in-place orders

that upended their daily lives. They blamed their elders. [Some claimed](#) that older people who were most at risk were acting selfishly in expecting younger generations to sacrifice for them. These sacrifices were not only financial and educational, but in "missing out on the full enjoyment of their youth," wrote [Jason Garshfield in an op-ed in the widely read blog Real Clear Politics](#). "We deserve better than patronizing lectures on social responsibility," he said. His proposal, which was circulated on social media, called for isolating people over the age of fifty while letting others get on with their lives.

Politicians stoked the fire. In March 2020, the [Lieutenant Governor of Texas](#) stated that grandparents should be willing to die from COVID-19 in order to rescue the economy for their grandchildren.²⁸ Even more alarming were [discussions in hospitals and nursing homes](#) about rationing PPE, access to testing, and lifesaving devices such as ventilators in favor of younger peoples' lives. As the virus spread and older people began to die, the hashtag #BoomerRemover trended on Twitter.

[Trent Stamp, CEO at the Eisner Foundation](#), believes that the recovery from COVID-19 has been hindered by the initial ageist reactions to COVID-19. "It led young people, particularly younger white people, toward complacency. Young people returned to gyms, bars and salons, armed with a sense of invincibility and the blessing of local leaders, and the inevitable rise in cases came...[The] generational divide created a scenario where one group of people—the young—could fill the bars on Taco Tuesday, once we crammed another group—our seniors—back into their apartments, houses and nursing homes."

Stamp and others sounded a clarion call. COVID-19 showed that society needs a more constructive and future-oriented approach to aging, as well as a more organized and strategic commitment. Now is the time to turn ageism on its head. This includes a better understanding of how aging can and should be a positive experience.

2

Positive Aging and Creative Aging

We have to make a sustained effort, again and again, to cultivate the positive aspects within us.

— The Dalai Lama

Here's some positive news. The benefits of aging extend far beyond that free cup of coffee at the local donut shop or that discount on popcorn at the movies. As we become older, scientists tell us, we attain a level of wisdom, insight, and creative thought that would not have been possible when we were younger. Our ability to read situations and circumstances sharpens. Our self-knowledge and openness to recognizing and learning from our mistakes increases. We may not have the same spring in our step as we did at the age of twenty-five, but we shed negative emotions like envy and anger. In other words, our **psychological and emotional health improves**. As we loosen up and stop having to win every argument, control every situation, or fret about every perceived slight, we find that we are more content with our lives. And although the aging process means that we will suffer loss, grief, and declining physical health, **many of us find that as we grow older, we become happier.**

"This awareness of happiness comes, ironically, when we reach the age and stage when we recognize life's limits because of a changing perception of time," says Laura Carstensen, Director of the Stanford Center on Longevity. When people age, "they tend to savor relationships and focus on meaningful activities. When you focus on emotionally meaningful goals, life gets better, you feel better, and the negative emotions become less frequent and more fleeting when they occur."²⁹

Physical, environmental, and societal dynamics also contribute to longevity. These include money, education, access to health care, and living in a safe community—what gerontologist Louise Aronson calls "nurture factors."³⁰ Those of us fortunate enough to live into "young old age" (fifty-five to seventy-four) and then advance into "old old age" (seventy-five and beyond) might also credit "good genes" and luck. And, if we don't want to press our luck, we can control some of our behaviors. We can eat our fruits and vegetables,

sleep enough, get regular mental and physical exercise, watch our weight, drink plenty of water, practice good hygiene, avoid smoking, and moderate our consumption of donuts, buttered popcorn, coffee, and other guilty pleasures. Finally, as social creatures, we can do our part to maintain strong and meaningful social connections.

Yet even if all of this lines up in our favor as we age, the most untapped factor for assuring quality of life and longevity is our increased capacity for happiness.³¹

People who are given the chance to nurture and expand this capacity will not only have more fun but will potentially increase their life span.

Unfortunately, the negative force of societal ageism undermines older peoples' innate capacity for happiness. One recent study overseen by psychologists at University of Colorado showed that even brief exposure to negative ageist stereotypes increased older peoples' levels of worry and anxiety about aging.³² People and institutional settings that "activate" age stereotypes for older adults—



At the Speed Art Museum, Toya Northington led workshops on making art from memories. Courtesy: Speed Art Museum

by distrusting their ideas or the accuracy of their memories, for example—actually impair their cognitive functioning. According to a [two-decade-long study](#) published in 2017 by the National Institute of Health, invoking negative stereotypes and beliefs about aging can trigger brain changes related to Alzheimer's. People who succumb to negative attitudes about aging risk reducing their life spans by seven-and-a-half years. They can lose their self-esteem and isolate themselves from others, leading to loneliness, depression, and other mental health issues. On the other hand, reinforcing and encouraging the positive aspects of aging correlates with people retaining high physical and cognitive functioning. This is all the more reason that society needs to activate a positive conversation about aging and honor the ways that older age can be a time of contentment, joyfulness, and positivity.

Happier people are more open to new experiences, and this bodes well for the interactions between museums and older people. A 2017 study of the public's attitudes about cultural organizations showed that adults over the age of sixty-five were more likely than younger adults to say that they value visiting a cultural organization to learn something new.³³ Museums have many new constituents to gain from a growing pool of active, curious individuals with time on their hands and a renewed motivation to learn and

pursue emotionally meaningful goals. They will not only be contributing to these individuals' fulfillment, but to their life expectancy.

And museums don't have to go at it alone. Two burgeoning movements in the US that provide resources to encourage and support positive aging are natural allies with the museum sector: age-friendly communities and creative aging.³⁴

Age-Friendly Communities

Older people are seeking affirming spaces and new social networks. Retired people want to find new purpose. They look for encouragement from people who are part of a different generation.

— Toya Northington, Speed Art Museum

For the past few generations, it has been common for retirees to downsize their belongings and relocate to a retirement community. These communities may offer inexpensive living accommodations, low taxes, favorable weather, and multiple recreational activities, but there's a hitch. Because retirement communities are segregated by age, they contribute to the isolation

and lack of intergenerational contact that fuel ageism. To counter this problem, a concept is on the rise called “age-friendly communities,” which seeks to make communities attractive and livable for people of all ages, so that older people do not have to segregate to live comfortably.

Among the champions of age-friendly communities is the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO), which has developed a range of policy briefs that show their benefits. WHO calls for cities and communities around the globe to develop resources to allow their older residents to age in place and contribute to their communities’ diversity and dynamism. These resources include safe transportation and walkability, key services like quality health care, affordable housing that is adaptable for people with disabilities, inclusive social values like honoring LGBTQ+ rights, safe environments with features like smoke-free air and potable water, and social spaces that are accessible to and inclusive of older people.

In the US, [AARP](#) is the nexus for locating such communities. Using its livability index, which ranks communities according to qualities that link to positive aging, it has identified over five hundred cities in the country, large and small, that have adopted age-friendly policies and practices. Notably for museums, some of the most important factors in the ranking are the opportunities for social engagement and access to cultural and educational resources. Thus, communities like San Francisco, Boston, and Seattle rank highest in the [most recent edition](#) of the index despite their high cost of living. So do St. Paul, Minnesota, and smaller Wisconsin cities like Madison, Sheboygan, and La Crosse despite their cold winter climates. Museums and other arts and cultural organizations would do well to make a case to policymakers in designated age-friendly communities that their venues should, at the very least, be promoted as social gathering places for older citizens. Better yet, they should integrate another kind of programmatic offering linked to positive aging into age-friendly community planning efforts: creative aging.

Creative Aging

A recent article in [Psychology Today](#) puts it well: just as there is more to positive thinking than trite phrases like “making lemonade out of lemons,” there is much more to creative aging than “making macaroni necklaces.” Creative aging is a serious research-driven educational methodology for older adults that promotes positive and healthy aging through sustained engagement with high-quality, professional artistic practices.

The movement was catalyzed in the early 2000s by findings from a study led by Dr. Gene D. Cohen in partnership with the National Endowment for the Arts and the Center on Aging, Health and Humanities at The George Washington University.³⁵ Over a two-year period, Cohen collected baseline data, conducted cognitive tests, and followed up with three hundred adults between the ages of sixty-five and 103 (about two-thirds white and one-third people of color) taking artmaking classes in Washington, DC; Brooklyn; and San Francisco. Cohen found that learning new artistic skills markedly improved the seniors’ health. They visited the doctor less often, reduced their use of medication, responded with more accuracy and acuity on mental health measures, increased their involvement in other social activities, and reported marked improvements in their social lives—all as a result of the short-term art workshops and classes.

Artists and educators have long been aware of the physical and mental health benefits that come from practicing dance, music, pottery, poetry, painting, and other artforms. When we are creative, we enter a positive state of mind that psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls “flow.” We become fully absorbed in the task at hand and at the same time feel part of something bigger than ourselves. Our sense of time transforms.³⁶ So does our sense of self. And as we master new skills, our brains transform.

Dr. Cohen’s study showed that artmaking has special benefits for older adults in the arena of positive aging. When stimulated and “exercised,” older brains combine

the deep knowledge that comes from accumulated experiences with increased neural capacity and elasticity. Through engaging in novel, creative experiences, we can build a “cognitive reserve” that protects the brain. In short, artmaking improves older adults’ brain power and may inhibit cognitive decline.³⁷

This is particularly true when the learning experiences are scaffolded over time, and when teaching artists make intentional efforts to encourage social engagement, which is another important part of positive aging. Teaching artists who respect older adults’ learning styles and nurture their ability to learn new skills do more than just demonstrate dance steps, painting methods, or beading techniques. They build older peoples’ self-confidence and engage with them as peers, creating experiences that decrease the risk factors that may lead to institutionalization, dementia, and poor health. Museums that offer creative aging classes can feel proud that their offerings have such life-saving potential.

Creative Aging and Museums: A Historical Context

Creative aging programs may be a natural fit for museums’ educational missions and community engagement aspirations, but they are not simple tack-ons. “I want museums to know that this is not about creating shallow programs. You have to think carefully about how you develop a program for someone older,” says Toya Northington, Community Manager of the Speed Art Museum and a contributor to this report. To be successful, museums need to look beyond their membership databases and understand the needs and aspirations of older people in their broader communities. They need to develop a curriculum thoughtfully. They need to ensure their facilities are accessible. As discussed above, they need to avoid talking down to older adults and stereotyping their capabilities, which is harmful to their health. And, as with any program, they need to make sure it’s worth the participants’



Martin Steingesser, the former poet laureate of Maine, leads a poetry workshop at Museum L-A. Courtesy: Museum L-A

engagement—even people with time on their hands don’t want to feel that they are wasting it. **Staff and volunteers at every level must be serious about serving this audience well. Older audiences come to museums with different motivations and physical, emotional, and intellectual needs than the younger audiences museum education departments are more accustomed to serving.** Thus, creative aging programs that intentionally link to the goals of positive aging add a significant new dimension to educators’ portfolios.

Though today’s museum educators possess considerable expertise in working with children and schools, it is worth remembering that allowing schoolchildren into museums—especially those with valuable art collections—was once controversial. For this reason, museum educators have worked hard for the past hundred-plus years to justify the importance of their work from both educational and pragmatic perspectives. Today, the field boasts many resources to guide the creation and implementation of museum educational programs that take into account the principles of child development; changing school curricular frameworks including Common Core Standards, STEM, and STEAM; integrated learning; and other important considerations for working with youth as well as teachers and caregivers. Many museums regularly offer training and resources for P-12 teachers, sponsor family days, and develop special programs for teens and young adults—with the implicit goal to inspire younger audiences to grow into dedicated museumgoers and stewards.

Museums have not been this attentive to the needs of older adults. Prior to the AAM/Aroha Seeding Vitality Arts in Museums initiative, museums' primary programs for older audiences fell into three categories. The first, and best known, are volunteer and docent programs which have existed in one form or another since the early twentieth century. Older volunteers have contributed substantially to museums' human resources, in many cases serving as the lifeblood without whom museums would not survive. Yet over the years these programs have also contributed to miscommunications between younger entry-level staff and deeply invested older volunteers with long tenures at the museum. This tension is endemic to museums' efforts to become professionally run organizations that serve a broad cross-section of their communities. Positive approaches to the ageist (and sometimes racially charged) aspects of these pressures are presented in Chapter Five, although a larger discussion of museum volunteer programs is beyond the scope of this report.

The other two kinds of museum programs targeted to older adults are more recent. The first arose during the 1980s as museums sought to attract retirees in order to generate new sources of earned income. They created travel programs, sometimes billed as [“a curated selection of privileged travel opportunities,”](#) to contribute to their bottom line.³⁸ The second are specialized grant-funded educational programs for older adults with Alzheimer's and dementia. In the 2000s, MoMA developed its (since-discontinued) [Alzheimer's Project](#) to train arts and health professionals on how to make art accessible to people living with dementia. Since 2010, [the Frye Museum in Seattle's](#) robust creative aging program for older people with dementia has offered small-group experiences in the galleries, one-on-one artmaking in care communities, and conferences that bring together health care providers and social workers with artists. Targeted programs for older adults with dementia have yielded great benefits both for the participants and the museums. However, museums have not embarked on a wider, systematic effort to

develop and incorporate educationally sound positive aging programs for the growing population of healthy, active older people.

Mary Helen Reuter, Curator of Education and Visitor Experience at the Naples Botanical Garden in Florida, sums up the challenge well: “Museums tend to be really good at developing age-appropriate programs for kids. We need to become just as good at creating age-appropriate learning opportunities for older adults.” Attaining this level of expertise will take training, coaching, seeding programs, documentation, evaluation, and advocacy. It was this realization that motivated Aroha Philanthropies and AAM to design the Seeding Vitality Arts in Museums initiative.



Naples Botanical Garden led a course in nature journaling in its gardens. Courtesy: Naples Botanical Garden.

Seeding Vitality Arts in Museums

I believe that creative aging not only enriches our institution, but it also reinforces our mission as it gives our elders the agency to celebrate their stories, experiences, and desire to learn and create a creative community.

— Antonio Pazaran, National Museum of Mexican Art

Seeding Vitality Arts in Museums is the most in-depth demonstration project focused on healthy and positive aging ever undertaken by the museum field. “We believed that museums would be eager to develop [creative aging] programs, that they needed help developing them, and that older adults would clamor for them and their lives would be enriched immeasurably through the experience,” said Teresa Bonner, Executive Director of [Aroha Philanthropies](#), the Minneapolis-based funder, when the Seeding Vitality Arts in Museums initiative was announced in 2018.

The initiative helped spread “Vitality Arts,” Aroha’s brand for its philanthropic work in the creative aging field, to museums across the country. It brought together several partners, including AAM, a cohort of twenty diverse museums in the US (see Appendix D for a full list), and [Lifetime Arts](#), a non-profit organization that is the national leader in designing and disseminating model creative aging programs for active older adults.

The museum cohort benefited from training, technical assistance, resources, and a networking platform.

The goals of Seeding Vitality Arts in Museums were to:

- Demonstrate the power and impact of creative aging programs to a broad national audience,
- Encourage arts and cultural organizations to develop participatory arts education programs for older adults,
- Encourage organizations that serve older adults to develop arts education programming, and
- Disseminate effective program models

Seeding Vitality Arts in Museums was based on two pilot projects. The first began in 2016 with a cohort of fifteen nonprofit organizations across the nation. The second began a year later in Aroha’s home state of Minnesota with a cohort of thirteen nonprofits, including senior centers, museums, and other community organizations. Both pilot projects funded

Participants in a Museum L-A workshop made paper sculptures inspired by collection objects like shoes, bedspreads, and machine parts. Courtesy: Museum L-A.



cohort members to design and deliver high-quality art classes in a variety of media, from painting and drawing to filmmaking and choral music. Common to all of the classes was that they followed a curricular model advocated by Lifetime Arts.

The Lifetime Arts curricular model has five key features:

- 1** A sequential learning curriculum that builds knowledge and mastery over time through scaffolding units and techniques, supplemented with take-home assignments that build students' skills between sessions.
- 2** A minimum of eight sessions of at least ninety minutes, so that participants will make a time commitment and not view the classes as one-time workshops.
- 3** Instruction by a professional teaching artist who actively practices the artform they teach, has been trained to work with this age group, and upholds high standards and expectations of students no matter their age or experience level.
- 4** A curriculum that builds in opportunities for intentional social engagement between participants.
- 5** A public culminating event that calls on participants to share their work with a broader public in order to feel a sense of mastery and completion.³⁹

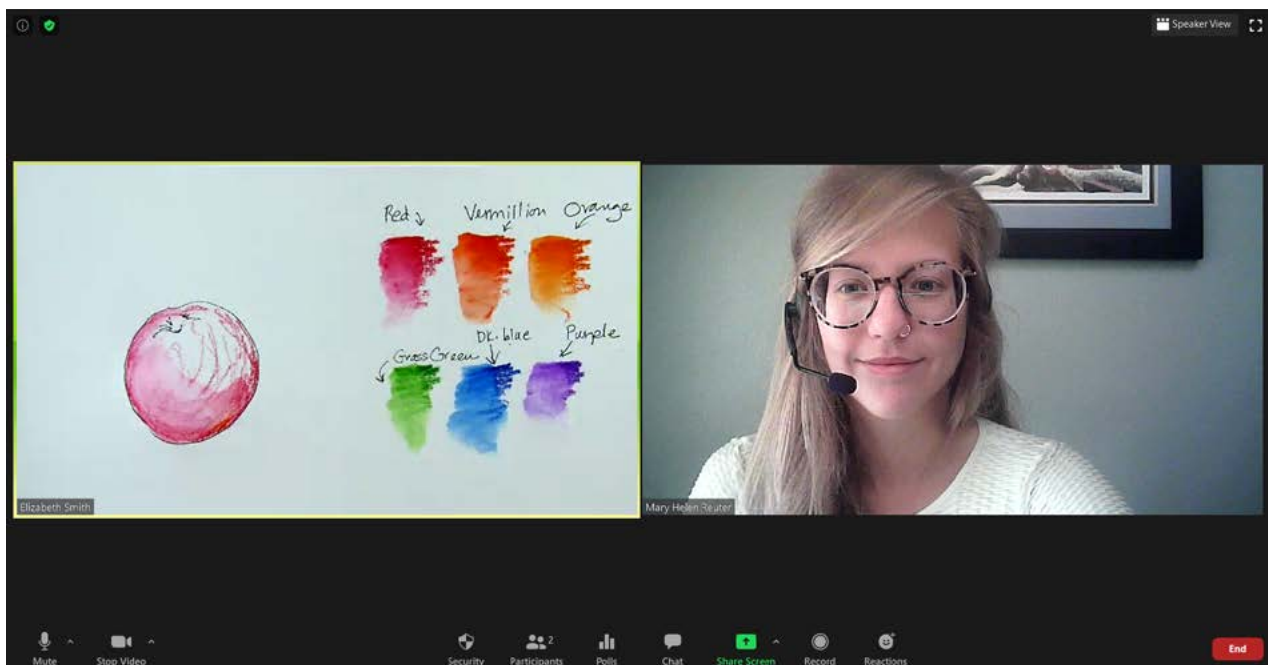
To support active participation, Lifetime Arts' model also emphasizes providing quality materials (e.g., professional art supplies and equipment) and securing suitable spaces/facilities for learning and culminating events, tailored as necessary to the physical requirements of participating older adults. To maximize participation, a requirement for the pilot was that all programs would be offered free-of-charge or at an affordable price for local older adults. To maximize effectiveness, the older students were asked to commit to attending all of the sessions and completing the curriculum.⁴⁰

In developing the Seeding Vitality Arts initiative in 2016, Aroha contracted Touchstone Center for Collaborative Inquiry, a Minneapolis-based firm, to evaluate the pilot programs in its first two cohorts, the first of which was national in scope and the second of which was confined to Minnesota-based organizations. Surveys of 2,187 program participants revealed uniformly high levels of satisfaction—a majority of the participants rated the programs as excellent, showing how important it is to engage qualified, trained teaching artists who are passionate both about teaching art and working with older adults.

Like the programs evaluated in the 2000s by Dr. Cohen, the Minnesota programs proved to be highly effective at helping older people grow artistically, emotionally, and socially.⁴¹ Two-thirds of the participants reported increased self-confidence, mental engagement, and knowledge. Almost three-quarters reported that they made new friends and social connections through the classes. People with mobility issues and disabilities reported that they felt more encouraged to participate in other community activities. These findings were consistent across the different artforms. An enthusiastic comment from one participant expresses the feeling of many people in her class: "We're busy and we're making art and it's a nice vibe. I can't say what a wonderful experience this has been for me."

The biggest challenges the pilot organizations faced were staff capacity, financial resources, and access to teaching artists who are trained in how to work with older adults. Another significant challenge, which may reflect the demographics of the communities that offered the programs, was diversity; the program attendees were primarily white women. Interestingly, new friendships occurred slightly more frequently in programs that enrolled at least 20 percent people of color.

In 2018, Aroha joined forces with AAM to expand its model to a third cohort: museums of all kinds. Thus the Seeding Vitality Arts in Museums initiative was born. Museums from around the nation were invited



Museum educator Mary Helen Reuter and teaching artist Elizabeth Smith led an online nature journaling workshop during the pandemic. Courtesy: Naples Botanical Garden.

to apply for funds that underwrote staff participation in training sessions in Minneapolis and materials and supplies for classes to be offered free-of-charge to older adults. The reviewers took care to select a cohort of institutions that reach diverse constituencies, so that the benefits of creative aging programs could be extended beyond museums' traditionally white audiences. For example, selected institutions included the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago and the Museo de Historia, Antropología y Arte of the University of Puerto Rico, both of which offered bilingual programs.

The cohort model allowed museum educators at different institutions to share documents, curricula, supply lists, budgets, and marketing strategies with each other. As they carefully rolled out their offerings in 2019 and the early part of 2020, the participating museums experienced immediate success. Across the board, they reported high demand and waitlists for course offerings; several reported being "completely maxed out" with older community members who were "eager for more." In some cases, class participants signed up to volunteer and join fundraising and other museum committees. "These courses, maybe more so than our K-12 programs, provided opportunity for experimentation. We did things that weren't possible with our other programming," said Sara Lowenburg, Manager of

Education at the Louisiana State Museum in New Orleans, describing a master beadwork program for older adults that highlighted objects from the museum's Cabildo collection. "The programs were a high point for our museum. They were an incredible opportunity to make explicit connections between audiences across different groups."

It was clear that the cohort museums had discovered something important about needs in their older adult communities. By Spring 2020, these needs would become even more pronounced.

Creative Aging Workshops during COVID-19

As older adults found themselves isolated during the COVID-19 lockdown, demand for creative aging programs grew. At the same time, a majority of arts centers and museums across the country were forced to cancel programmatic offerings and [suspend volunteer opportunities](#), leaving even their most loyal older adult followings feeling stranded. The Seeding Vitality Arts initiative took a different direction. With initial classes either completed or in process at the time of the lockdown, Aroha and Lifetime Arts offered cohort members the resources to pivot their curriculum to online classes, largely through Zoom.



For its online Creative Aging workshop titled “Journaling in the Time of Covid,” Ohio History Connection worked with artist Allison Chapman, who printed students’ journals on a nineteenth-century letterpress. In this photo: Allison Chapman speaking to the teacher of “Journaling in the Time of Covid,” Niki Gnezda, as she goes through the steps of making the journal for the class. Photo Credit: Michael Fouts. Courtesy of Ohio History Connection.

Through a series of webinars and the online platform Basecamp, Seeding Vitality Arts in Museum cohort members brainstormed curricular approaches and solutions to teaching artmaking online to older audiences. The urgency of the times called on educators to be extraordinarily resourceful. Some gathered artmaking materials and delivered them to participants’ residences; others procured iPads and other hardware for seniors in need. Educators worked closely with other departments at their museums as well as teaching artists to make sure that the technology would work. They developed new curricula in memoir writing, collage, creative movement, and nature journaling—all of which could be practiced, with support, from home.

Naturally, there were some glitches and technological meltdowns at first. But, by and large, stereotypes about older people’s reluctance to use or adjust to new technologies proved to be wrong. As Molissa Udevitz of the Anchorage Museum observed of her museum’s pivot to an online creative movement class, “Surprisingly, we did not field many tech questions from participants. Although I would like to think our advance preparations helped mitigate questions, I think the lack of questions may actually suggest our participants had a basic level of digital literacy and previous Zoom experience to begin with. As virtual learning expands, I hope to also reach older adults who are less experienced with digital technology. This could be done by publicizing classes to younger individuals, who could help their older family members and friends

connect to virtual learning opportunities.”

This pivot to virtual platforms opened up a new way of thinking about creative aging. Like museums’ other digital offerings, the classes brought people together from across town and even around the world. Geographic and artistic diversity seeded new kinds of connections and ideas across thousands of miles. Smithsonian Associates’ community of older singers, the [Boomers Chorus](#), inspired an online creative aging class in music theory. An older woman in Sofia, Bulgaria, found out about the memoir writing class at El Museo de Historia, Antropología y Arte in Puerto Rico, and joined in. The Zoom screens for Chicago’s National Museum of Mexican Art’s Viva la Vida programs lit up with the faces of older students beaming in from Wisconsin, Indiana, Washington, and as far away as Guanajuato, Mexico.

Participants reported that the programs lifted their spirits and gave them something to look forward to. “I feel better,” said one. “I really needed this.” The pivot also formed new connections within museums, as technology staff became more aware of their institutions’ commitment to working with older adults.

Participants found that, once mastered, some of Zoom’s functions—like the record feature and captioning—enhance learning and retention. Recorded sessions were useful for those who had to miss a class or wanted to replay part of a class a few times. Live captioning was beneficial to those with hearing difficulty. Some participants reported that taking classes in the privacy of their homes was freeing, especially when the classes involved creative movement and singing. Learning a new technology itself can be freeing for older people. As Tom Kambar, Founding Executive Director of [Older Adults Technology Services](#) (OATS), notes, “Older people are thinking in terms of capturing the vibrance of the economic, social and cultural environment in America today which has all these technology things going on. [When they commit to learning about a new technology,] they’re saying I want to take a bit of a leap and think in terms of the future.”

3

Case Studies

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CASE STUDY A:

The Unexpected Joys of Launching a Creative Aging Program at Museo de Historia, Antropología y Arte of the University of Puerto Rico⁴²

By Lisa Ortega-Pol

Learning and spreading the news about creative aging has been both a nobler responsibility and a bigger challenge than I originally imagined. As someone responsible for educational policy and programming for the past seventeen years at the at the Museum of History, Anthropology and Art on the campus of the University of Puerto Rico (a.k.a. [“the UPR Museum”](#)), I have become aware of the growing population of older adults who are hungry for opportunities and connections with the arts, but who also have needs like mobility, access to resources, mental and intellectual stimuli, and social engagement; and may be coping with depression, empty nest syndrome, or loss of loved ones.

In 2019, when the UPR Museum was selected for the [Seeding Vitality Arts in Museums](#) (SVA) project, it blew my mind. At the time, Puerto Rico was still recovering from the [devastating aftermath](#) of two [hurricanes](#), so the news brought joy on several levels. It was a perfect fit for us. We had already noticed increased participation from people fifty-five and older in our ongoing art workshop program, Family Sunday. We had already collected feedback from these participants on workshop topics they were most interested in. We wanted to serve our community by providing a safe place to decompress trauma. We just didn’t know when and with what funds to spearhead a much-needed older adult program. The opportunity that came with SVA in Museums was the green light we needed. We decided our creative aging program would be a series of creative writing workshops. Then the work began to craft a program exclusively for that age group.

After analyzing available facilities, going over logistics, and selecting teaching artists, we established a final calendar. The first cycle would run from July through August 2019, the second from October through

November 2019, and the third from February through March 2020. That would leave time between cycles to prepare reports and press releases, create digital albums, and prepare for the next set of workshops. We started to promote the workshops in April, first through social media, then our mailing lists, followed by announcements on our university radio station. Even though we spent close to no money on marketing beyond these internal efforts, we received an avalanche of phone and email inquiries! As one email message put it: “There’s a lot of talent and a yearning to stay active for those of us who are *‘fifty-five or better.’*”

Every workshop filled up quickly. Even after we announced in June that the workshops were fully booked, we kept receiving calls, emails, and personal visits from older adults. As one told us: “I know you’re all booked, and that’s a pity...for me at least. Are you sure that I cannot stand quietly in a corner so I can listen to the workshop instructor?” We originally built the classes to accommodate twenty people, but stretched to twenty-five. Plus, we had a waitlist of almost one hundred people!

We benefited from the excitement and support of our broader university community. The Continuing Education Program for Adults contributed coffee mugs and a lunch bag to give out to participants. The Legal Support Center sent brochures with valuable information about their free services. The idea was to give each enrolled person a tote bag with the goodies plus paper, pens, and pencils that could be used during the workshops. A newly graduated high school senior, Claudia León, helped us to prepare the tote bags as part of her summer internship through the [Young Ambassador Program](#), an initiative from the Smithsonian Latino Center.

How did we manage the buzz? First, we kept everybody—from front desk staff to the director—informed on the progress of the program, through emails and “hallway” meetings. Second, all staff got involved one way or another in the preparations. This was of utmost importance, since initially we naïvely thought that the program could be run from and by the Education Office staff alone (two people). Everyone from our security officer to front of house staff to administrative assistants had a role to play. Through team effort, we managed the enrollment process, the questions, and even the “add-me-to-your-waiting-list” petitions. Our newly hired Marketing Specialist created a timeline of when and how we would release information about the program, and together with the graphic artist proposed a [logo](#) and branding to help create awareness of the new initiative. The Administrative Assistant came up with the enrollment forms and a system to keep up with each cycle, payments, waiting lists, etc.

While this was happening, my education colleague Oneida Matos-Adorno and I were making decisions, finalizing class content and working out administrative details with the teaching artists, searching for art supply quotations, submitting curriculum proposals on the online platform, and appearing in press interviews. There were a lot of logistics involved when working with older learners and it’s important to pay attention to the details. When we host groups of schoolchildren, we count on their teachers and/or parents to play an active role. But when you have older people come into your space, you must think about accommodating for a different set of needs: caregivers, the size and legibility of your labels, and even making sure that you have easy access to rest areas and restrooms.

The workshops themselves were special for everybody. It was wonderful to have older adults on a college campus. Some participants expressed how happy they were to feel like they were “back in college” or experiencing their “first time in college.” And it was very good for the college students to see their excitement. The classes were funny, loud, and lively. To stay connected, participants started WhatsApp groups and shared memes and information about museums and artmaking classes.

When the pandemic came, the demand for our workshops took on greater meaning and purpose. After shuddering away the initial shock of this new reality, we got busy learning about online learning platforms and teaching artmaking remotely. As word got out about the online workshops, they filled quickly with people from different towns, near and far—one participant even joined us all the way from Bulgaria! Since the Museo de Historia, Antropología y Arte launched the creative aging program, I feel we have become advocates for creative aging and have provoked, through our involvement in the Seeding Vitality Arts in Museums initiative, a renewed institutional commitment to producing programming for people fifty-five *or better*. We are grateful to be able to provide quality programming through our “La Vida es un Arte” workshops, attuned to the times and circumstances of the community we serve. After its successful launch, “La Vida es un Arte” is here to stay. I hope we have created a wave. I want to see more cultural institutions reach out to the older adult audience with fun, stimulating, socially engaging, accessible creative aging programming. This better be so, because when my BFFs and me join the fifty-five-plus ranks, we’ll be first in line.



Participants in a Speed Art Museum workshop made Warhol-inspired portraits of significant but little-known African Americans from Louisville. Courtesy: Speed Art Museum.

CASE STUDY B:

Rebuilding Pathways: DEAI and Creative Aging Programs at the Speed Art Museum in Louisville

By Toya Northington

All of us have blind spots. Sometimes when we're connected with people or entities, we can't see faults in them. So, I'm going to offer some stories to help illustrate how this might show up in our institutions and help us create new memories that strengthen all of us. I'm going to start by telling you a little bit about myself, and then I'm going to talk about what's been happening at the Speed Art Museum. I'll conclude with lessons I've learned about the intersection between creative aging and diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion (DEAI).

My personal mission is to rebuild pathways in order to restore and liberate individuals, communities, and

systems through artistic expression. I know those are big goals for artmaking, so let me tell you how I came to them. I'm an only child. I was raised in a single-parent home by my mother. She has schizophrenia. Usually when I say this, people's eyes get big. They look up. Their chests tense, and they envision homeless people and mass shooters. But never would they ever think of the loving, caring mother that I have. My mother wanted me to have tools for resilience. She knew that as a Black woman, I was going to encounter sexism and racism. I would also carry the stigma of my mother's brain disorder. So, she wanted me to be prepared. Her tools of choice? Education, art, journaling, and meditation.

The art stuck with me. It's how I make sense of the world. I've understood its power to help me move through the world. But I hadn't thought about working in an art institution. To me, these are predominately white spaces. Then I thought, "Maybe I can forward my personal mission of restoring and liberating individuals, communities, and systems through artistic expression by building platforms for other peoples' voices that had largely been unheard." And this is what I do as Community Outreach Manager at the Speed Art Museum.

So now let me tell you about the Speed's "Our Life, Our Stories" workshops, offered through our program [Community Connections](#). For this series, the Speed partnered with the Genesis Arts Senior Enrichment Group and Arts Reach Jewelry Making Studio, two groups with roots in West Louisville and Smoketown. The participants selected photographs that reminded them of home, their upbringing, and their neighborhoods, and created new artworks with them. The main idea here was that museums could regenerate the power of old memories into new memories that are equally powerful. To show you how we did that in a surprising way, I'm going to talk about two of our participants. They are sisters: one is Ms. Alfordia and the other is Ms. Nita.



Participants in Speed Art Museum's workshops make progress on their portraits. Courtesy: Speed Art Museum

On the first day of our workshop, Ms. Alfordia leaned over and said, "Ms. Toya, I enjoyed my time here, today. I mean, this is really nice. But, I'm busy, so, I won't be coming back. But I wanted to let you know it's really nice what you're doing here." I said, "Oh, Ms. Alfordia, I appreciate you coming. I understand you're busy but if you have any free time that comes up, just come by and see us. We'd love to have you when you can. And let me tell you, that is not how our programs work. We ask you to sign up for this eight-week commitment. We want you to come every week, and if you don't come, it messes things up." I knew in that moment that it would be important to acknowledge the needs of people who are new to our museum and help them feel comfortable with us.

As the workshop continued, I walked over to Ms. Nita, impressed that she was seriously into her work. Ms. Nita looked up and said, "Ms. Toya. This is Mr. Glen." I said, "Who's Mr. Glen?" She said, with shimmering eyes, "That's Ms. Alfordia's and my father. He raised us and our seven siblings all by himself. He was a great man. He worked in the church. He taught softball. You would have just loved him. He was wonderful." Both sisters ended up coming back for more workshops, a testament to the power of listening and allowing for connections.

Things really came together at the last workshop, when Ms. Nita came over to me and said, "Toya, I've got a surprise." I like surprises. I didn't know who the surprise was for, but I was excited. Ms. Nita went on, "This morning our nephew came into town and surprised Ms. Alfordia for her birthday. And she doesn't know, but our sisters are in town too." I didn't think anything of it, but later I looked up at the door, and these ladies were standing there. And I thought, "Oh. This is the surprise. They are all joining us for Community Connections." They stayed with us the whole day, ate lunch, and told stories about Mr. Glen.

It didn't stop there. The final part of our workshop was an exhibition of everyone's work, and it too became a family affair. Ms. Alfordia's son came to deliver her flowers. And then, I got an email from Ms. Nita. It said,

"I got this great idea for Christmas presents." You see, her daughter lives in Japan and she couldn't come to the exhibit. But, she said, "You know what? I can put a picture of all of us on a mug, and I can give it to her." Not only did her daughter get this mug, but the whole family got the mug. And not only did the whole family get the mug, but they gave me a mug as well.

While it was fun, something deeper was happening that transformed my thinking. When people feel comfortable and heard, they will tell you what's on their minds. So, let me tell you about one of the things they told me.

Part of my role at the museum is to bring in new members and get people engaged who had previously been disconnected. So, during one workshop, I announced that the Speed has a membership program for anyone who qualifies for government assistance. Ms. Nita raised her hand and said, "Excuse me, Ms. Toya. Are you implying that we are old and poor?" I laughed and then I said, "Uh-oh. We've messed up here. Obviously, you are insulted." This literally came out of my mouth—I'm pretty straight with my participants. I said, "No, I didn't mean it in that way, but I understand why you took it that way. What's implied is that, 'This is a white institution and we've got some memberships for these old, poor, Black people.' I get it. I understand. No, that wasn't my intention. I do understand why you feel that way. But really, I just want people to be able to take advantage of this program if you feel the need and you want a membership, but it's not quite in your budget." I fumbled through that one, but I knew I needed to go back to the drawing board.

Now, we say it differently. We say, "We have a membership program. If cost is a barrier to you, we'd like you to sign up for a Speed for All membership." It's a subtle shift that takes it from being a deficit—"If you don't have any money, we're going to give you this membership"—to, "Hey, we have this for you that we'd like you to have. It's a gift. We're offering it to you if you'd like to take advantage of it." And since the beginning, we have never required any kind of proof

to show you're at a certain income level. We take you at your word. Nobody wants to feel stereotyped. Nobody. So, this made it more equitable in language and in practice.

What's interesting is that for "Our Life, Our Stories" we actively recruited in the African American community. Yet our final public workshop series was advertised more traditionally through our website and email blasts, and we received majority white participation, with only five African Americans out of twenty-two participants. It was a wonderful group, but we knew some voices were missing. As art institutions, when we talk about visitors, we know the majority are white and female. There's nothing wrong with acknowledging that. That's our community, generally speaking. But some communities are different. They might be predominately African American, with no other diversity represented. You have to be conscious of who you want to bring into the space. We talk a lot in our museum about DEAI work. Really, that is asking: who is at this table and who is missing? And then, when we're making space for different communities, how do we make sure that they're heard and seen?

What do you do when your participants don't reflect the diversity you'd like to see in your programs? You work with what you've got. If I didn't have diversity in the classroom, I would need to put it in my curriculum. I went to Kim Spence, the Speed Art Museum's Curator of Works on Paper, and said, "This is a Community Connections program. I'm supposed to amplify the voices of people who have stories that were untold."

Kim helped me put together a list of little-known African Americans in Kentucky, like the Civil Rights activist [Ms. Alberta Jones](#), the first African American woman to be admitted into the Kentucky bar. In the resulting program, she presented to participants on the contributions of these little-known people, and they all picked one to turn into an [iconic figure](#). It was inspired by Andy Warhol, because he took things that are overlooked and ignored and made them iconic.

Representation matters. Why does it matter? Because institutions have a responsibility to tell those stories.

So, how do we grow from here? Here are some of my takeaways for doing creative aging programs that honor our elders' experiences as part of a commitment to DEAL:

1 Language is important. It's how people feel safe.

It's how people feel welcome and included. It's how people know that they're seen. The rules of societies are governed from the perspective of white, Western, male culture. That's a narrow view. When you think about other groups, you know that this language comes from one specific value system. And so, what we want to do is find more inclusive language that speaks to the different values, identities, and perspectives of different people. It's a constant process. Even people who try to be very conscientious about language need to check and correct ourselves with the language we use. It goes back to some of our stereotypes about older people. They said to me, "Don't call me a senior. We're mature adults and that's how we should be looked at." And so, you need to let people tell you which language to use. They'll tell you their pronouns, and they'll tell you how they want to be addressed.

2 You have to think about intersectionality. Even if it's a program targeted to older people and I can check the box and say, "Everyone here is fifty-five and older," who is at this table? Are they fifty-five and over and Latinx? Are they African American? Are they differently abled? Who is missing? And don't just think about what people need from the table. Think about what they bring to the table.

3 Diversity doesn't happen naturally. Just because I'm African American and I say, "Hey, I want African Americans to come," it does not happen that way. And vice versa for anyone who has an identity from any marginalized group. You

have to build trust, usually with trusted partners, and you have to continue those relationships.

4 We need to be willing to sit down and listen to people. Because when you've been marginalized, you may be ashamed to admit you don't have something. Will the Black and brown people who we want to attend our programs feel comfortable admitting to us if they don't have access to technology or feel uncomfortable in our space? You need to think about that.

5 Ask people to tell you their stories. When people arrived at our programs, I saw that some of them didn't know each other. So, day one, I asked them to share their stories. "Why did you come here and what did you want to get out of this?" And we learned that, no matter who they were and where they were coming from, older people were coming for similar reasons. They were starting fresh. They were moving on after retirement. They wanted to have some fun. They were looking for new social networks. The long-term involvement is going to pay off. It just takes some effort to get there. I have also found that older people feel an urgent need to pass on the lessons they have learned in their lives.

6 Think about intergenerational programming. There is so much potential here. For example, I have found in my work that LGBTQ+ youth really need to connect to older LGBTQ+ community members. Museums have an opportunity right now to transition from youth programs to intergenerational programs. We think of education in terms of what we can do for kids, but we are missing out on the hope that happens when someone is over fifty-five. It's an optimistic age. You have a lifetime of experience. Think about how you would develop a program for someone who is curious and on the brink of breakthrough. Design creative aging programs for that moment.



Participants in the Anchorage Museum's book arts workshop made their own books inspired by those in the museum's collection. Courtesy: Anchorage Museum

CASE STUDY C: **Cross-Departmental Collaboration Generates Vitality and Creativity at the Anchorage Museum**

By Molissa Udevitz, Educator, Anchorage Museum

The balance between personal vitality and overall well-being is particularly delicate for individuals aging in the North, where climate and geography present challenges to fully engaging in creative pursuits and other healthy activities.

This balance is all the more precarious in the arctic climes of Alaska, where older adults often find themselves isolated from traditional support networks, especially when younger family members leave the state. Twenty-five percent of the population in Anchorage is over the age of sixty-five, and this older population is growing four times faster than the rest

of the US. The need for programs that sustain Alaska's older populations' vitality and spark their creativity is clear, and the Anchorage Museum is positioned to meet these needs.

These are just a few reasons that in spring 2019, with support from Aroha Philanthropies, the Anchorage Museum launched "Vital & Creative," sequential art workshops geared to adults ages fifty-five and older. The museum is committed to reducing barriers like cost for older adults, so the programs were offered free-of-charge. Not surprisingly, they filled immediately.

The first workshop investigated textile arts, the second creative movement, and the third book arts. These themes were inspired by Northern traditional knowledge and lifeways, and the Anchorage Museum's extensive collection of Northern art and cultural objects was brought to life with the expertise of local community artists, elders, and the participants themselves.

"Vital & Creative: Textile Arts for Ages 55+" focused on different textile techniques, including hand felting and hand sewing, and materials, such as moose hide and calico. Many in the class had little prior sewing experience and did not view themselves as artists. With guidance from teaching artist Amy Meissner and inspiration from fellow participants, these students embraced their wall-hanging projects to express personal stories.

For the second series, "Vital & Creative: Expressive Movement for Ages 55+," the Anchorage Museum used its collection to expand participants' understanding of movement. Collections staff carefully selected and shared objects and archival materials related to dance from the museum's collection. These included a traditional Tlingit tunic, a video created by contemporary Alaska Native artist Nicolas Galanin, original sketches of the Iñupiaq Wolf Dance circa 1900, and archival materials of Anchorage arts performances presented in scrapbooks.

Participants were then invited to explore a variety of body movements through warm-up, balance, and stretching exercises. Professional musicians provided accompaniment for several classes, inspiring participants and their movements. The participants also learned dance composition skills and explored movement improvisation in the museum's Art of the North gallery. By the end of eight weeks, participants were comfortable making personal movement choices and used movement improvisation to connect with one another.

The third series, "Vital & Creative: Book Arts for 55+," finished just before COVID-19 shutdowns. Local

artist Susan Share guided participants in making paste paper, pamphlet books, and paper pop-ups. Books from the museum's collection were also showcased. Students created their own books and contributed poems to a group book that was mailed to participants during the pandemic lockdown.

In response to COVID-19, the Anchorage Museum adapted our in-person movement series into four weeks of virtual classes called "Vital & Creative: Movement at Home for Ages 55+" to provide older adults an opportunity to do physical activity at a time when many were unable to leave their homes or attend group fitness classes.

Preparing for virtual delivery presented an unexpected opportunity. The museum partnered with a local dance educator, Stephanie Wonchala. She was already teaching youth virtual dance classes. When she explained that dancers had difficulty hearing both her directions and the music at the same time, museum exhibitions and information technology staff created an audio set-up with a sound mixer and other technology for Stephanie. This cross-departmental collaboration allowed departments to work together in new ways and increased the internal visibility of these classes.

Stephanie guided participants through gentle movement exercises to feel-good music, and participant survey feedback was very positive. One person shared, "After just the first class, I felt happy, which is a good thing to be feeling these days." A powerful story emerged from a participant who was recovering from COVID-19. She explained, "This class has been perfect to gradually regain strength and confidence in my body...I am healing and getting my body back."

The virtual class format allowed the Anchorage Museum to reach more people per class than the physical classroom at the museum could comfortably accommodate, and individuals who had not previously participated in the "Vital & Creative" series joined the virtual classes. This could be because some people

felt more comfortable doing movement in their own homes, or because the barrier of traveling to the museum was removed.

Building on the successes of the virtual movement classes, the Anchorage Museum also adapted our in-person “Vital & Creative: Book Arts for 55+” workshop for virtual delivery in fall 2020. Retaining the same teaching artist, Susan Share, helped smooth this transition, since the artmaking activities were similar for both teaching formats. Two major differences were that material kits for the entire seven-week course were prepared in advance and that museum objects could not be adequately shared through Zoom. Instead, collections staff created short videos for several books from the museum’s collection and these videos were shared with participants.

Whether held in-person or virtually, these “Vital & Creative” programs for adults fifty-five and up

are incredibly beneficial for and valued by those who participate. The participants build confidence, overcome their preconceptions about their lack of creativity, and develop connections with one another. These programs are also rewarding for museum staff, allowing for interdepartmental collaboration and including staff who do not regularly interface with this community of older Alaskans.

The shared experiences of creating art together—even while physically apart due to COVID-19—is helping bridge the isolation so many people feel right now. Museums are essential to providing these types of experiences. We should be proud of this work and recommit to creating more inclusive opportunities for all older adults in our local communities.



A participant in Naples Botanical Garden's nature journaling program paints by a lily pond. Courtesy: Naples Botanical Garden

CASE STUDY D: **Breaking Ice in a Tropical Garden: Nature Journaling and Social Engagement at the Naples Botanical Garden, Florida**

Many botanical gardens and arboreta have robust educational programs meant to inspire a love of nature as well as creative ways to tend and appreciate it. The beauty and variety of the plant and animal life that inhabit these museums' carefully tended spaces also provides a simulating environment for making art. A popular practice that incorporates and expands upon many artistic practices is nature journaling. Nature journaling encourages its practitioners to look and listen closely to nature, pay attention to its smallest details, and, using a handmade journal, explore their reactions in various artistic media—painting, sketching, and poetry, to name a few. Nature journaling is an ideal way to connect people with the living collections of Naples Botanical Garden, one of the organizations that received funds for the Aroha Philanthropies Seeding Vitality Arts in Museums initiative.

Naples Botanical Garden offered its first nature journaling classes in 2013 as non-sequential one-off sessions. These programs, along with other adult programs offered at the time, were not as widely attended as its youth programs. How then could promising movements like nature journaling be used to reach a wider adult audience? And could a more thorough curriculum be developed to meet the goals of mindfulness and connections embedded in the philosophy of nature journaling?

NBG began to conduct extensive audience and demographic research about its community in 2018. Given that it operates in a region with a large population of retirees, this research helped staff consider new ways to serve and grow audiences by developing offerings targeted to people over the age of fifty-five. This is when they learned of the Aroha Philanthropies initiative's sequential learning model



Study of acorns created during a nature journal class exercise.
Courtesy: Naples Botanical Garden.

for older adults. The model aligned well to both the institution's mandate to better fulfill the needs of older local citizens and the practice of nature journaling in general. With Aroha's support, teaching artist Elizabeth Smith and NBG's Curator of Education and Visitor Experience Mary Helen Reuter created an eight-week on-site course called "Nature Journaling: Botany Through Art." For each three-hour session, Smith presented on techniques—such as color mixing, finding familiar shapes in nature, and writing down observations. She then accompanied the students as they practiced their newfound skills on NBG's grounds. Homework assignments were designed to build the participants' skill levels and keep them engaged.

Yet one question remained: how could the curriculum support older students' needs for social interaction? Nature journaling is largely a solitary and highly personal practice that calls for close observation, deep listening, and being still and silent in nature. At

the same time, we know that social connections and community are very important components of any successful creative aging program. "[Thus], we needed to be very intentional about how we were going to encourage people to engage with each other," says Reuter, "while remaining true to the intention behind the artistic practice of journaling." She decided to develop short icebreakers and other social activities that were fun and also matched the day's content. They proved to be so successful that they often went well beyond the allotted time, in one case lasting an entire hour because everyone was having so much fun!

For the lesson on how to observe flowers and match their colors by creating a color palette, Reuter used *A Bloom a Day*, Ron van Dongen's [eponymous plant horoscope book](#), to create an icebreaker that would ease students into getting to know more about each other. The book matches each day of the year with a blossom and corresponding fortune that describes the meaning and personality of the flower and foretells the destiny of people born on that day. One by one, students introduced themselves by name, flipped to their birth date in the book, and read aloud what the flower that illustrates their day says about them. This lighthearted format set the stage for students to emotionally and visually engage with flowers through the day's nature journaling exercise.

Another helpful icebreaker that Reuter used during a class early on in the eight-week session was "feedback for a famous artist." This icebreaker is intended to model proper feedback techniques and etiquette, as students begin to create more of their own work and share with others. The exercise involves formulating productive suggestions for a famous artist on one of their creations. While you could use any artwork and artist for this prompt, Reuter chose botanical prints created by artists such as Frida Kahlo, Vincent van Gogh, and Mally Khorasantchi, a Naples-based artist who draws inspiration from the local environment. Reuter reminded the students that giving advice to an artist should always be done with permission, and

so the class would pretend that the artists she had selected had agreed to this exercise. Each student chose a piece and took time to look at it closely. They answered three prompts in their natural journals:

- 1** One thing about this piece that resonates with me...
- 2** I would like to know more about...
- 3** One suggestion I have is....

After the allotted time, students shared and discussed their feedback in pairs. This exercise was a way not only to have fun, but also to empower students to give feedback to one another and share what they learned throughout the session.

Finally, Reuter assigned homework to the class called “one inch tall” that focused on perspective. The goal of this writing and sharing prompt was to encourage students to think about the world around them in a new way. Each student was asked to write a story and draw an accompanying journal page in response to the following prompt: “If you were one inch tall, where would you go in the Garden and what would you do?” When the students brought their journals to class, they divided into pairs and shared their creations with each other.

Exit surveys showed that the students not only wanted the formal aspects of the class to last longer, but they craved more time to socialize. The camaraderie was so strong that after the participants completed the nature journaling series, many stayed in touch with one another, meeting at NBG for lunch dates, volunteering, and journaling together. In March 2020, the weekly in-person meetings had to be called off due to COVID-19. But the participants didn’t halt their practice or interactions. In fact, as people around the globe turned to nature journaling as a way to

alleviate stress and take advantage of the outdoors, the Naples Botanical Garden students launched a Facebook group to share their work and support each other, hoping to stay engaged and connected—all of which, in addition to the mindfulness encouraged by nature journaling, are vital practices to combat social isolation.

This urge to connect and support one another was so strong that during a Zoom meeting of natural journaling alumni in December 2020, all of the participants voiced how great it was to see each other’s faces again. They talked about their personal struggles coping with the pandemic and how grateful they were that the NBG’s staff was motivating them to stay creatively engaged.

In the summer, NBG piloted two virtual three-week natural journaling programs for students fifty-five and older that allowed the educators to test virtual methods, before launching virtual eight-week sessions in 2021. For this new virtual platform, Reuter applied what she had learned by developing the icebreakers and homework assignments to help students navigate the classroom technology. “We found during our pilot programs that frontloading the technology in one long demonstration is sometimes stressful for students. So, Elizabeth and I are seeding the technology into various lessons to make it more intentional and purposeful, as well as fun in a way that will speak specifically to the needs of our audiences.” Again, these efforts were so well-received that NBG set up an optional mid-week video meeting (on top of their engagement over the virtual Google Classroom and class-time icebreakers). In this way, the Naples Botanical Garden has demonstrated the power of tending not only flora and fauna, but the human beings who enjoy and care for each other.

CASE STUDY E:

Firing Up New Connections: “Journeying into Clay” at the Union County Historical Society and Heritage Museum in New Albany, Mississippi

Sometimes just having someone to go to lunch with makes all the difference in the world. So when participants in creative aging pottery courses at the [Union County Historical Society and Heritage Museum](#) in [New Albany, Mississippi](#), started arriving early so they could eat together at a restaurant in town before class began, the museum’s Director Jill Smith knew that she had tapped into a deep need in this small community of nine thousand residents. “Older people here are starved for community and meaningful connection,” says Steve Bennett, the Museum’s Vista Volunteer Museum Educator. “This may sound odd to say about a small town like ours, but people who’ve lived around the corner from each other for decades never met each other until they came to one of our artmaking classes. And now they are friends who’ve bonded over something they have in common.”

Even though they make up one-third of New Albany’s residents, older people are isolated from one another. A quarter live below the poverty line. Fifteen percent live alone. Life in small town America offers many advantages, but it still requires a concerted effort and compelling venue to help older people connect with each other. The demand for Union County Museum’s creative aging programs is now so high that Bennett laments that “we could be doing much more. We just don’t have the space.”

The museum was founded in 1991 in a former church as part of New Albany’s effort to revitalize its region. Over the next two decades, it grew to encompass six galleries, the William Faulkner Library

and Literary Garden, an “art house” with a pottery studio, and a small pioneer village. Schoolchildren and families use the museum as an educational and recreational resource. Tourists visiting the town where famed novelist William Faulkner was born also come. Aware that the town’s aging population had few creative outlets and people were asking about



Untitled (Family) by Mardonio Magaña-Camacho (c. 1935). The famed Mexican sculptor didn’t discover his artistic talent until he was in his mid-fifties. His encore career and accomplishments inspired the Seeding Vitality Arts in Museums sculpture courses offered by the National Museum of Mexico in Chicago. Image courtesy of Fallingwater, Western Pennsylvania Conservancy, 1988.170.

artmaking programs, Union County Museum joined Seeding Vitality Arts in Museums in 2019. The training in the Lifetime Arts curriculum structure allowed staff to experiment with different course themes. Offerings included a printmaking course, followed by “Storytelling: Memoirs, Music & Mixed Media,” which was inspired by the plants and quotes in the Literary Garden. These projects as well as the culminating events went well, although at times attendance was sporadic.

Interest grew when the museum realized that older people in the community were attracted to the pottery studio. The museum had a connection to a potter who was also a teaching artist at nearby Blue Mountain College, as well as volunteers and interns who could help. Thus “Journeying into Clay” was born, an eight-week class for people fifty-five and older that built off of the South’s great tradition of pottery. It was an immediate success. The course quickly filled to capacity, with a waitlist. During its earlier creative aging offerings, the museum decided to develop playful icebreakers as a way of introducing people who were total strangers to one another.

It was hard for people to leave once the class time was over. “They wanted to keep their hands in the mud,” says the museum’s Director Jill Smith, so studio hours were extended, and the museum began to offer morning studio time. “People were so happy find out about us. They came in from all over the county. One ninety-two-year old drove twenty-five miles each way just to be part of this.” One participant became so excited about pottery-making that he bought a kiln for his home.

Reflecting on the appeal of pottery as an artform, Bennett adds, “The opportunity to touch and be touched is often missing in older people’s lives. Doing pottery doesn’t substitute for human touch, but there is something very satisfying about the feel of clay.”

There were other unexpected benefits of doing this work, says Bennett. “We opened up a dialogue about age barriers. We had to articulate to younger people who wanted to take these classes why they were limited to people over the age of fifty-five. That let us explain how and why these courses were important.” There were also bonds created between older participants and the younger volunteers, which Bennett hopes further increased intergenerational understanding.

Smith adds that the classes helped to build membership and awareness of other museum-related groups, including the Society & Museum and the Tallahatchie Arts Council, and even helped to leverage a grant from the Mississippi Hills National Heritage Area that wanted to build up the number of people in the community who are trained in heritage crafts so they could be demonstrators for events targeted to tourists.

Perhaps most gratifying were the new friendships that blossomed among older adults brought together by their interest in artmaking. After the official class ended, the camaraderie was so strong that participants continued to stay in touch. Some formed support pods during the COVID-19 pandemic. “Since I retired,” said one participant, “I have lost contact with people. I have loved this class because I met new people, we go to lunch together, and it made a world of difference to me.”

4

Lessons Learned from the Seeding Vitality Arts in Museums Initiative

“This programming is fabulous! Not only is the instructor terrific and the details worked out beautifully, but at this particular time it helps us feel connected and exposes us to others’ perspectives (literally). All class participants are over fifty-five, but that is where the similarity ends. The group is highly diverse as is the experience brought to the class. It’s really wonderful to see how different people express their visions.”

— Participant in a creative aging drawing class at Louisiana State Museum in New Orleans

By all accounts, Seeding Vitality Arts in Museums was a resounding success. The results suggest great potential for replicating the program beyond the initial cohort, engaging a large number of older adults who are in need and will respond positively to sequential art classes offered in a museum setting. “I hope we have created a wave,” says Lisa Ortega-Pol, Educator at Museo de Historia, Antropología y Arte of the University of Puerto Rico and a contributor to this report. “I feel we became advocates for creative aging and provoked, through our involvement in the Seeding Vitality Arts in Museums initiative, a renewed institutional commitment to producing programming for people fifty-five or better.”

The key outcome was over one hundred sequential art-making classes in a diverse range of media. Trained teaching artists developed courses that emphasized skill-building, the creative process, and intentional social engagement, which culminated in performances, exhibitions, and celebrations around the nation. The museums in the Seeding Vitality Arts in Museums cohort were able to tailor the [Lifetime Arts](#) curriculum to their missions, collections, and communities and reach new audiences. Developing programming for older adults freed museum educators to think flexibly and creatively about different artforms, ideas, and teaching formats, since the programs weren’t harnessed to rigid school curricula. At the same time, they needed to consider and respond to other kinds of challenges and develop new tools. Through the cohort model and ongoing support and communication tools provided by Aroha, they were able to brainstorm and share ideas. Taken together, their experiences point to six lessons that were common to all of the participating museums.

- **Start small.** Even though museums are likely to experience strong demand for creative aging arts programs, it is wise to start small and test



Memoir writing workshop at Union County Museum in Albany, Mississippi. Courtesy of Union County Museum

different topic areas and approaches. Smaller class sizes are better so that no one is overwhelmed, and instructors can devote one-on-one attention to those who may need it. Some of the pilot programs offered through Seeding Vitality Arts in Museums started with enrollments of only five students. Even as the museums built up their offerings, they capped their class sizes (usually at around twenty, although this number varied according to subject matter, facility size, availability of equipment, and instructors' preferences.)

- **Be creative.** Many museums discovered that out-of-the-box topics and unusual artforms were more popular with older audiences than standard adult education offerings, and altered their course offerings accordingly. For example, the Louisiana State Museum originally envisioned offering creative aging classes in conventional art practices like watercolor and illustration. But through surveying the community, educators learned that older adults were more interested in beading, a colorful artform associated with Mardi Gras culture that is popular in New Orleans. Staff sought out local “culture-bearer” Big Chief Darryl Montana, whose work was on display in the museum. He [designed a beading class for adults aged fifty-five to ninety](#) that built their skills in looping, dangling, and stacking beads into vibrant artistic works.
- **Leverage the museum’s unique assets.** Louisiana State Museum isn’t the only museum that used the work on display in its galleries as a springboard to creative aging curriculum. The Heard Museum in Phoenix developed a workshop in Navajo weaving techniques, inspired by its collection and access to skilled practitioners of the complex artform. The Anchorage Museum, also inspired by its collection of Indigenous art, taught older students textile arts and encouraged them to experiment with traditional local materials like moose hide. The John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, inspired students to complete sophisticated pieces from polymer clay.

Museum L-A in Lewiston, Maine, offered classes in contra dancing. Garfield Park Conservatory in Chicago used its living collections as inspiration for a course in botanical drawing. Museums’ collections, relationships with artists, outdoor spaces, and curatorial expertise are just a few of the unique assets that can contribute to powerful creative aging programs.

- **Market proactively.** Older people, especially those who aren’t members of the museum, are more inclined to look to senior centers, adult education organizations, and other more familiar venues for artmaking programs. They are likely unaware of museums’ resources and offerings. Thus, museums must be proactive in making connections with older audiences and communicating that they are welcome to attend programs. Museums can do this by:
 - ◆ Reaching out to older people in the community who may be in need, including those who’ve recently lost spouses and partners, and people who are living alone.
 - ◆ Advertising through gatekeepers that serve older people: senior centers, religious organizations, gerontologists, bereavement groups, age-friendly communities’ websites, and so on.
 - ◆ Featuring images of older people in promotional materials.
 - ◆ Promoting through all relevant channels. Participants in the Seeding Vitality Arts in Museums programs found that the best vehicle for spreading the word about creative aging programs was social media.
 - ◆ Adding a tab on the website listing programs for the fifty-five-plus audience.
 - ◆ Using appropriate anti-ageist language in marketing materials. The Frameworks Institute has developed an invaluable [toolkit](#) of steps, tips, and suggestions for the kinds of language to use and avoid in communications about older adults.

- **Invest in the culminating event.** Culminating events and celebrations—exhibitions, performances, publications, live readings, and demonstrations where participants shared their accomplishments with family, friends, and the wider community—were highlights of the pilot programs. From an educational perspective, the participants benefited from preparing their work for a public stage. Museums in turn benefited from the multiplier effect of these community-building events: some reported that participants brought as many as forty guests with them. Students supplemented the museum’s refreshments with homemade food, gifts, and other forms of gratitude. These culminating events became opportunities to recruit new members and volunteers and advertise additional programs.
- **Prepare physical and virtual spaces.** Museums—whether they are housed in repurposed industrial buildings, historic houses, or special architectural commissions—are not often designed for the needs of older users who may have mobility impairments or other pressing physical needs. Virtual spaces too can be difficult to navigate, especially for older people with visual and hearing impairments. Museums’ creative aging programs must happen in spaces that are both accessible and welcoming. People of all ages and abilities will benefit from the accessibility suggestions below, which align with the guidelines for [Universal Design](#).
- **Audit the physical facility and especially the spaces where classes will be taking place:**
 - ◆ Are they well-lit?
 - ◆ Is signage accessible? Does it use a high-contrast typeface that can be easily read?
 - ◆ Do the acoustics work for people with hearing impairments? Is there background noise coming from other nearby spaces that might impede people’s hearing?
 - ◆ Is seating plentiful and ergonomic?
 - ◆ Are the restrooms nearby, easy to find, and accessible?

- ◆ Can reasonable accommodations be made for people who have physical limitations?
- ◆ Can reasonable accommodations be made for people accompanied by caregivers?

- **Audit the museum’s website so that it too is accessible to older visitors:**

- ◆ Does the website design adhere to appropriate [Universal Design principles](#)?
- ◆ Have museums considered how to engage older adults with newer technologies? (This question is considered in more depth below.)

How to Help Older People Get the Most Out of Technology

My biggest surprise when the museum shut down because of COVID-19 was that our oldest volunteers—even those in their nineties—wanted to learn more about technology so they could continue to participate in the museum while sheltering in place.

— Carol Thomson, Volunteer Manager for the Museum of Flight, Seattle

Age is not an obstacle when it comes to adjusting to new technology. Technologists might complain that older people seem to have more trouble than younger people keeping track of their passwords and staying on top of unexpected software upgrades, but the common belief that older people are simply too old to learn a new technology is not true.

Tom Kamber, Founding Executive Director of [Older Adults Technology Services](#) (OATS), believes that society underestimates seniors’ willingness and interest to engage with technology. That is why, during summer 2020, he spoke via Zoom to museum educators and teaching artists who were in the early stages of pivoting their Aroha-funded creative aging

programs to an online format. He answered some of their pressing questions: What problems could older people encounter as they adapt to virtual classrooms and other new technologies? Is it worthwhile to even go to the trouble of engaging older adults via Zoom? Are there ways to think about Zoom and similar technologies that can help everyone get the most out of the experience?

There are clear benefits to using these online platforms, but Kamber believes that arts and cultural providers must be “super, super thoughtful about supporting and training people while they’re using this stuff.” That is why he cofounded OATS in 2004 in Brooklyn. OATS’ initial mission was to help seniors learn and use technology so they could live better in the digital age. Now it has grown into a 6.2-million-dollar organization that not only offers technology training for older Americans, but also links [aging people in rural communities to technology](#), consults with large organizations to help them solve industry challenges related to aging and technology, and is perhaps best known for its network of [Senior Planet Centers](#), technology-themed community centers for older adults that sport the motto “Aging with Attitude.”

Based on Kamber’s insights, museums wishing to use technology to engage older adults with museum content from their homes might consider the following tips and techniques for maximizing participation.

- 1 Be strategic and intentional.** Kamber suggests that museums make content and curriculum decisions first, and then figure out what technology they will need to deliver the content. He believes that the optimal online creative aging programs allow for creativity and exploration of both the capability of the technology and the integrity of the artform and course content. Once you know your programmatic goals, decide what kind of technology to use, what kind of connectivity is needed, what kind of systems will build learning, who will need support, and how the museum will deliver it.

- 2 Focus on widely available, commercially made devices and software programs.** Kamber cautions that specialty items targeted to older people (like Jitterbug phones) are too limiting for the kinds of virtual connections museums want to help older people make. Instead, design programs for devices like iPads, Android tablets, PCs, and Chromebooks. Recommended virtual platforms include Zoom and Google Classroom, because they are simple to use, affordable, and robust.

- 3 Understand that some people will need more help than others.** Older people participating in online museum programs will have varying capabilities of dealing with different technological platforms. Some are more technologically literate than we may initially assume and will need little training—they may even be retired engineers, technicians, or computer specialists who can lend a helping hand to others in the class. Others may be first-time users for whom absorbing a new technology is challenging. But using one-shot trainings with an accompanying instruction sheet that precedes the class tends to be too overwhelming. Museums should instead consider “seeding” the training throughout the creative aging class, or even offering one-on-one training sessions for those who need and want them.

- 4 Follow accessibility best practices.** Briana Stevenson from [Sound Generations](#), a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting people on their aging journey through community connections and accessible services, recommends that museums follow accessibility guidelines and make adjustments for fonts, color contrast, design, and sound for any content delivered digitally. For online classes, real-time captioning is essential, although museums should also pay attention to how captions are displayed to viewers. Also helpful in art classes are image descriptions for people with low vision.



Left: Photos of students' woven artworks created through an online creative aging weaving course taught by Ohio History Connection. Courtesy: Ohio History Connection. Right: A group of four older adults work on beading projects with teaching artist Big Chief Darryl Montana at the Louisiana State Museum in New Orleans. Photo Credit: Sara Lowenburg

5 Expect technical hiccups. There will inevitably be difficulties when getting any kind of new technology up and running. The advantage to working with older people is that they tend to be more patient and forgiving than younger people when the technology doesn't run perfectly the first few times.

6 Don't expect the technology to resonate for everyone. As Kamber says, "When you're creating a technology and intervention, roughly 25 percent of people over the age of sixty are not going to be on the technology that you're talking about. So you need to figure out how to support or engage them in some other way." For example, some students will be listening by phone and will not have access to video technology. Instructors need to remember these students and check in on them during the sessions.

7 Be proactive about the digital divide. Although [most older Americans live in households with access to computers and the internet](#), the biggest obstacle to connecting older people to new technology is society's pervasive digital divide. The 2019 Elder Index estimates that half of older adults who live alone and 23 percent of those in two-elder households don't have the financial resources required to pay for basic needs, let alone computers. Museums must be aware of the cost barriers that impede some

older people's access to appropriate hardware, reliable Wi-Fi, and up-to-date software and subscriptions. They should also understand that some older people might feel ashamed to admit that they can't afford these items. There are opportunities for museums to partner with organizations like [Older Adults Technology Services](#) (OATS) and [Sound Generations](#) (among many others) to help find resources to bridge this divide for older people.

8 Be culturally competent and empathetic as to how older people learn. Working with older people requires cultural competency. It is important to establish a rapport that will put them at ease, especially before they do something new or complicated. Be sure to ask them what's going on in their lives, using questions like, "How is your day going?" "Hey, what's going on for you today?" "Where are you physically located?" "Where will you be sitting when you might be taking a program?" "What's in the room with you?" and "What kind of connectivity do you have?" Start with open-ended questions that make everyone comfortable.

5

A Call to Action for The Future

Any organization that has a mission of serving its community has to think about how we're serving older adults, just as deeply as we're serving all of our other constituencies.

— Dan Hagerty, Director of Strategic Initiatives, Heard Museum

Now is the time for museums to embrace the values of creative aging in all facets of their work: through enhancing their programs for the community, implementing anti-ageist human resources practices, and encouraging partnerships that set a direction for the future. In 2035, Americans over the age of sixty-five will outnumber children in the nation. In 2045, people of color will comprise the majority of the US population. In response to these convergent trends, as well as other data presented in this report, this report concludes with three overarching recommendations.

Museums should:

- 1** Expand their investment in creative aging programming
- 2** Implement anti-ageist human resources practices
- 3** Seed the future through encouraging and supporting research and partnerships that lead to more intergenerational collaborations

Developing high-quality creative aging educational programs—such as the sequential learning courses piloted by the Seeding Vitality Arts in Museums cohort—will have immediate impact. The courses will bring together older people who are seeking social connection. They will enhance their quality of life and cognitive health. They will contribute to audience growth. And, let's be honest, in light of the current demographic shifts and the fact that older people (predominantly white older people) [control almost 70 percent of the nation's wealth](#), there may be the financial benefit that comes from developing a new base of fans and supporters. Society is on the cusp of what has been called the [greatest generational wealth transfer in history](#), whereby older people will make arrangements to bequeath their wealth to a younger

segment of the population. Museums don't want to be left out of that equation.

At the same time, the medical, psychological, demographic, and economic studies that informed this report, coupled with the success of the Seeding Vitality Arts in Museums creative aging pilot programs, point to future action that is ethical, strategic, and aligned with the field's commitment to diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion (DEAI) within museums' internal operations. Building and training a diverse workforce of professionals and volunteers of all ages is tied to long-term institutional health.

1. Expanding creative aging programming

Museums need to build their capacity to offer the kinds of sequential learning opportunities piloted through Seeding Vitality Arts in Museums. The field will need more toolkits, more cohorts who are willing to share their experiences, and more models for reaching older people of color and addressing physical and virtual access issues in their programs. As museums strengthen their expertise in creating



Intergenerational artmaking in action at Ruth's Table in San Francisco. This program was developed by teen interns at the de Young Museum. Photo by Samantha Sanders.

programs for older adults, the younger museum audiences of today will also stand to benefit, when they become tomorrow's older audiences. In addition to replicating the sequential learning model pioneered by Lifetime Arts and discussed in this report, many more opportunities exist for programs targeted to older adults that align with each museum's unique assets, locales, and strategic priorities. Some are listed below:

- **Offer early morning hours.** Museums can be noisy places that bustle with people and activities. For this reason, some set aside hours for audiences who may appreciate a little bit of quiet and calm. In the case of older adults who are early risers, this might be as simple as making galleries or large spaces available for those who need a [safe indoor space to go for a morning power walk](#). Museums could sweeten the deal by serving free morning coffee and donuts in a central space in the museum, or advertising late morning meetups in the café or restaurant with discounted menus.
- **Facilitate intergenerational programs in artmaking.** In summer 2019, the de Young Museum in San Francisco [brought a cohort of teen interns](#) to lead a collage-making workshop at a senior living facility. The teens described the connections they made with older adults as a highlight of their summer. The rewards are even greater with sequential and multi-session art programs such as [The Neon Museum in Las Vegas' performance series](#). Here, teens and older adults co-developed performances using the museum's Neon Boneyard as inspiration. "It was pretty refreshing [to be with teenagers]," said one older participant. "It's like their energy just flowed over to us."
- **Create summer-camp-like programs for older adults.** Many museums operate well-developed summer camp programs for children. Why not build on museums' longtime expertise in sequential camp-like day programming to expand into [year-round elder camps](#)?⁴³
- **Invite older community members to interpret archival photos.** A visual image might trigger a memory and add knowledge to archival photos in the collection. For example, in 2013, the Anchorage Museum began an outreach effort to identify individuals, places, natural features, and elements of the built environment in historic photographs taken of rural Alaska villages. The museum hosted a booth at the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) annual meeting and invited conference attendees to help identify any unknown people, places, or features in the photographs.
- **Commission artists to develop work about ageism, aging, and creative aging.** Art museums have long curated retrospectives of known artists' lifeworks, but why shouldn't they expand their curatorial programs to emphasize how artists' visions have transformed in older age, or even showcase those who have developed sophisticated artistic practices as encore careers? In addition, the conceptual possibilities for contemporary commissions responding to ageism are as endless as they are exciting. For example, they might look like a piece the artist Rirkrit Tiravanija made for National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, Australia, addressing loneliness, community, and artmaking. In 2019, his [Untitled \(lunch box\)](#) called on museum staff to invite four visitors who were strangers to each other to enjoy a free lunch together in the museum's galleries.

2. Implementing Anti-Ageist Human Resources Practices

Anti-ageist advocacy can begin in the workplace. Museums need to commit to exceeding the legal requirements that prohibit age discrimination in their hiring, firing, and other human resources practices and strive to build awareness, understanding, and respectful relationships between staff, volunteers, and board members of all ages. This will involve being proactive in anti-ageist communication and training, and adopting the following practices:

- **Use terms and phrases that are non-judgmental toward older people in all forms of internal and external communication.** Although the preferred term is “older people,” other words that might be used when referring to this cohort are “fifty-five-plus,” “oldster,” and “elder.” Some people find the term “senior citizen” to be off-putting, while others don’t. There is even disagreement amongst older people about the term “older people.” The best way to pinpoint language that is acceptable and appropriate within a particular institution or in regard to a coworker is to ask (tactfully, of course).
- **On the other hand, in addition to the ageist phrases discussed in Chapter One’s section on workplace ageism, other hurtful words and expressions should never be tolerated.** These including describing older people as “geezers,” “feeble,” “senile,” “frail,” “weak,” “daffy,” “cute,” “just a little old lady,” “one of those clueless old white guys,” and so on. More terms and phrases to avoid (some of which are counterintuitive) are included in Appendix A.
- **Offer ongoing training in intergenerational understanding and communication skills.** Beyond using respectful language, other behaviors will enhance intergenerational understanding in the workplace.

Older staff and volunteers need to develop appropriate communication strategies for the ways that people younger than them take in information. They would do well to build their skills in **active listening**. That means asking questions, not dominating the conversation or talking over people. It means avoiding meandering “war stories,” uninvited personal reminiscences about the past, and phrases like “you’re too young to remember this, but ...” It means rephrasing the dismissive expression “we tried that before and it didn’t work” to fit the context and specifics of the situation, as in: “Five years ago we tried that, and it didn’t work for these three reasons. Let’s talk about how things might be different now and whether and why now is a good time to try again.”

Younger staff and volunteers would also do well to develop a practice of active listening. That means avoiding up-to-the-minute cultural references and casual phrases in favor of appropriate professional language. It means developing the habit of conducting research and asking questions before offering opinions, making assumptions, or leaping to conclusions. Digging into an institution and community’s history—as well as the history of the museum field—can help newer generations of employees develop a critical awareness of the context for past decisions.
- **Invite experts on ageism to be part of staff meetings and trainings in order to build awareness.** Museums would do well to make sure that their workforce (both paid and volunteer) is aware of the especially harmful impact of ageism and stereotyping on women, LGBTQ+ people, and people of color.
- **Train security staff and floor staff to be alert and sensitive to the physical needs of older people who are part of the visiting public.**
- **Explore creating “returnships” and “360 mentorships”** (see Chapter One) to train older workers and volunteers in contemporary issues and skills and the museum field’s standards for DEAI and inclusiveness in language and behavior.
- **Audit volunteer programs, with an eye to:**
 - ◆ **Hiring qualified volunteer coordinators.** Do not put someone in charge of a volunteer or

docent program who sees it as a temporary steppingstone to a different position within the museum. Make sure they have demonstrated the empathy and tact needed to work with older volunteers, and that they are aware of the issues of ageism and positive aging.

- ◆ **Creating socializing opportunities** for older volunteers that are meaningful, and most importantly, fun: book clubs, insider tours of museum collections storage and conservation areas, field trips, dining opportunities, and so on.
- ◆ **Developing strategies for dealing with** volunteers who may resist contemporary fieldwide dialogues or, in the words of one museum's volunteer coordinator interviewed for this report, "drive everyone nuts."⁴⁴
- ◆ **Implementing baseline requirements to assure that all volunteers and programs adhere to fostering the museum as an inclusive, anti-ageist, anti-racist, anti-biased public space.**
- **Finally, acknowledge that discussions about race between older white and younger POC staff and volunteers are essential.** According to an in-depth study commissioned by the [Frameworks Institute](#),⁴⁵ the vast majority of older white Americans strongly disapprove of racism. At the same time, most are unaware of the invisibility of their own privilege or how their unconscious behavior can continue to perpetuate racial injustices. These blind spots can contribute to an uncomfortable and unproductive power dynamic between themselves and younger staff, volunteers, and visitors of color with whom they interact. Rather than sweep these tensions under the rug, it essential that anti-ageist museums position themselves as safe spaces for honest and meaningful intergenerational dialogue about race. Anti-ageism activist Ashton Applewhite, who recently released a guide on the [intersection of ageism and racism](#), notes that these dialogues can be messy and hard. Nonetheless, she believes

that they are also sustainable, ethical, and have the potential to bring about joyful breakthroughs. In addition to Applewhite's guide, the Frameworks Institute, [MASS Action](#), [Racial Equity Tools](#), [Incluseum](#), and others offer guidelines and toolkits that articulate ways to frame these discussions. Museums should consult these tools so that discussions about race are beneficial and productive.⁴⁶

3. Seeding the Future through Intergenerational Collaboration

To fully position itself to support creative aging and anti-ageism, the museum sector needs to go beyond awareness and even a commitment to act. Museums need more data, research, documentation, evaluation, and toolkits.



An educator at Museum L-A introduces workshop participants to objects from the museum's collection for inspiration. Courtesy: Museum L-A



The Neon Museum's intergenerational creative aging performance classes took inspiration from the museum's collection of vintage neon signs. Courtesy: The Neon Museum

The field lacks sufficient data about the needs and proclivities of older audiences, including a deeper demographic analysis about older people who visit museums and those who do not. What do older audiences want? How can museums communicate with older people who currently do not utilize them? What other kinds of community assets and services exist that might help museums support and reach the older people in their locales?

University-based museum studies programs and other trainers of the future museum workforce should encourage this kind of research and integrate the lessons learned thus far into their curriculum. Other university divisions—psychology, education, teacher training, fine arts, campus galleries, public health,

behavioral science and medicine—are also important partners, as are local government and public health agencies, senior care centers, and libraries.

At their most fundamental level, museums are bridges between generations and across the ages. Their collections, exhibitions, and programs can be seen as a contract, a promise as it were, that stories, legacies, and memories will live on and help us understand each other better. It is incumbent upon museums, then, to be models for intergenerational communication, problem-solving, and co-creation. Creative aging is a powerful practice that brings people of all ages and backgrounds together to find joy and build knowledge to pass on to future generations.

Notes

Notes

Introduction

1. This report uses of the term “older adults” to refer to people of all backgrounds, ethnicities, genders, and races who are over the age of fifty-five. The Glossary in Appendix A presents some terms to avoid when discussing older people.
2. Sources for this data are the National Endowment for the Arts, U.S. Patterns of Arts Participation (2019) and Culture Track, 2017, raw data.
3. Susie Wilkening and James Chung (2009). *Life Stages of the Museum Visitor: Building Engagement Over a Lifetime* (Washington, D.C.: AAM Press).

Executive Summary

4. See Winston Tseng, “Healthy Aging for Diverse Older Adults in the U.S.,” in Andrew E. Scharlach, ed. *Healthy Aging in Sociocultural Context* (2013). New York: Routledge, 22 – 25 and Karen I. Fredriksen-Goldsen, et. al, “[The Aging and Health Report: Disparities and Resilience among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Older Adults](#)” (lgbtaggingcenter.org, 2011); 13 – 14.
5. David Schei, Nan Kari and Erik Dosedel, “[Vital at Every Age: Final Report for On Seeding Vitality in the Arts](#)” (April 16, 2020), ([Touchstone Center for Collaborative Inquiry](#)), 1.
6. Vitality Arts is Aroha Philanthropies’ “brand” for its philanthropic work in the creative/artful aging field. Vitality Arts programs are multi-session arts learning programs that build skills over time and that include a culminating event. Aroha has trademarked this name.
7. The quotes from Seeding Vitality Arts participants come from a variety of reports, videos, and interviews, and although they capture the spirit of the participants’ remarks, some have been slightly edited or for context.
8. Three of these case studies are adapted and expanded from prior reports that were published during 2019 and 2020 on the [American Alliance of Museums’ Creative Aging blog](#).

CHAPTER ONE:

Aging and Ageism in American Society

9. Alexandre Kalache, quoted in Kathleen Burge and Amanda Henson, “[How to Prepare For An Aging Planet](#),” Agefriendly.com, 19 November 2019.
10. Louise Aronson, *Elderhood: Redefining Aging, Transforming Medicine, Reimagining Life* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019), 175 – 176.
11. See Appendix B for a snapshot of creative aging by the numbers.
12. Applewhite, Ashton (2016) *This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto Against Ageism* (New York: Celadon Books), 23.
13. World Health Organization (2015), “World Report on Aging and Health,” 11.
14. Between 1968 and 1988, in the US, laws and policies substantially bettered the lives of older adults. Until the mid-twentieth century, poverty was rampant in the older adult population. The situation improved until the late 1980s when the wealth gap began to widen again for people in all age groups. For more information how public policy aimed to improve the lives of older Americans in the twentieth century, see John L. Palmer, Timothy Smeeding and Barbara Boyle Torey, eds (1988) *The Vulnerable* (Washington, D.C., Urban Institute Press), 72, 333.
15. Karen I. Fredriksen-Goldsen, et. al, “[The Aging and Health Report: Disparities and Resilience among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Older Adults](#)” (lgbtaggingcenter.org, 2011); 13 – 14.
16. For more information on how museums can support queer elders, see Eli Burke (2020) “Intuition and Vulnerability: A Queer Approach to Museum Education,” *Journal of Museum Education*, 45:4, 403-413
17. Jacob Sweet, “The Loneliness Pandemic: The psychology and social costs of isolation in everyday life,” *Harvard Magazine* (January/February 2021), 32.
18. Tseng, 22.
19. [Age distribution by religious attendance](#), Pew Research Center, Religious Landscape Study.

20. Loneliness impacts people of all ages. Although the statistics across different age groups vary, some researchers posit that younger generations may suffer from it more acutely than older adults. Nonetheless, it is a growing societal condition with serious health implications that museums are in a position to address across all generations. See: [Cigna Loneliness Index \(2018\)](#) and Schiffman, Richard, “[How Two Lonely Generations Are Helping Each Other Heal](#),” *New York Times*, 20 March 2021.
21. Louise Aronson, “[Necessary Violence](#),” *New England Review*, Vol. 31, No. 3, 2017.
22. Aronson, *Elderhood*, 71.
23. Lawrence Samuel, “How We Can End Ageism in the Workplace,” [Psychology Today](#), 19 November 2020.
24. See: R. A. Postuma and Campion, M.A., “Age Stereotypes in the workplace: common stereotypes, moderators, and future research directions,” *Journal of Management*, Volume 35, Issue 1, 2009, pp. 158 – 188 and E. Oliveira and C. Cabral-Cardosa, “Older workers’ representation and age-based stereotype threats in the workplace,” *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, Volume 32, Issue 3, 2017, pages 254 – 268.
25. Applewhite, 149–151.
26. Applewhite, 159.
27. Carol Fishman Cohen, “How the Pandemic Has Created New Demand for Older Workers,” *Harvard Business Review*, June 04, 2020.
28. Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick was not the first American politician to go on record with an ageist political message; in 1984, Colorado governor Richard D. Lamm described America’s elderly as “an intolerable burden on the economic system and the younger generation’s future.” See Palmer, et. al, 381 – 382.

CHAPTER TWO: Positive Aging and Creative Aging

29. Laura Carstensen, quoted in Deborah Netburn, “The aging paradox: The older we get, the happier we are,” *Los Angeles Times*, 24 August 2016.
30. Aronson, 277.
31. Jonathan Rauch, *The Happiness Curve: Why Life Gets Better After 50* (2018: St. Martin’s Press).

32. J. Molden and Maxfield, M., “The impact of aging stereotypes on dementia worry,” *European Journal of Ageing*, Volume 14, Issue 1, 1 March 2017, pages 29 – 37.
33. LaPlaca Cohen, [Culture Track ‘17](#), page 12.
34. Aroha Philanthropies has developed the phrase “Vitality Arts” to refer to its model for developing and implementing creative aging programming.
35. Cohen, G. D., & The Center on Aging, Health & Humanities, The George Washington University (GW) (2006). “[The Creativity and Aging Study: The Impact of Professionally Conducted Cultural Programs on Older Adults](#).”
36. Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly (2008). *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics)
37. American Academy of Neurology study, cited in Malchiodi, Cathy, “Creativity as a Wellness Practice,” *Psychology Today* (December 31, 2015).
38. See *Attracting Older Visitors to Museums* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Retired Persons, 1985).
39. These features are further explained in a series of short, informative videos produced by Aroha Philanthropies: [Creative Aging: The Essentials](#)
[Creative Aging: Untapped Opportunity](#)
[Creative Aging: Isolation to Connection](#)
[Creative Aging: In-Person to Online](#)
[Creative Aging: Why Teaching Artists?](#)
40. Schei, David, Nan Kari and Erik Dosedel, “[Vital at Every Age: Final Report for On Seeding Vitality in the Arts](#)” (April 16, 2020), ([Touchstone Center for Collaborative Inquiry](#))
41. Ibid.

CHAPTER THREE: Case Studies

42. Adapted from a [September 2019](#) blog post and conversation one year later in September 2020 between Lisa Ortega-Pol and Marjorie Schwarzer.

CHAPTER FIVE: A Call to Action for The Future

43. For information on elder camps, see “[Get Away and Play at Summer Camps for Adults](#),” AARP, May 28, 2019.

44. See: Marjorie Schwarzer, [“Giving Back: Museums and Older Volunteers during COVID-19,”](#) and Sophie Haigney, [“Museums Have a Docent Problem: Inside the struggle to train a mostly white, unpaid tour guide corps to talk about race,”](#) *Slate*, August 18, 2020.
45. Aubrun, Axel and Joseph Grady, [“Thinking About Race Findings from Cognitive Elicitations,”](#) (August 2004).
46. Andrew Plumley, Director of Inclusion at American Alliance of Museums, reminds museums to be especially mindful of “not putting a young BIPOC member in a position where they have to mine their own trauma for other people’s learning, or be in a position where older white staff are ‘practicing’ being in conversation with a BIPOC person. It’s subtle, but the framing of the conversations matters, as well as making sure power dynamics are managed appropriately.”

Appendix A: Glossary

47. Applewhite, 37.

Appendix B: Creative Aging by the Numbers

48. Sources: [uscensus.gov](#), Culture Track, NEA Arts Survey, National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, Scheie, David, Nan Kari and Erik Dosedel, [“Vital at Every Age: Final Report on Seeding Vitality Arts”](#) (April 16, 2020), ([Touchstone Center for Collaborative Inquiry](#)).

Appendices

- A. Glossary: Common Terms and Phrases to Avoid
- B. Creative Aging by the Numbers
- C. Additional Case Studies
- D. Additional Resources
- E. Seeding Vitality Arts in Museums Cohort Museums
- F. Acknowledgements

Appendix A

Glossary

Common Terms in the Discourse on Aging Americans and Creative Aging:

- **Encore Career:** Post-retirement work that combines income, greater personal meaning, and social impact. Often pursued in the nonprofit sector by retirees.
- **Gerontocracy:** A system that is controlled by people who are older than most of the population
- **Gerontophobia, or Age-Phobia:** Fear of old people, similar to fear of people with disabilities or people who are different
- **“Older Old:”** Older adults over the age of seventy-five
- **Teaching Artist:** A practicing professional artist who also works as an educator. There is a need for teaching artists who are also trained to work with older adults.
- **“Younger Old:”** Older adults between the ages of fifty-five and seventy-four

Terms and Expressions to Avoid:

- **Senior Citizen:** The preferred term is “older people.” Other terms that are sometimes used are “fifty-five and better,” “oldster,” and, in some cultures, “elder.” There is even disagreement about the term “older people,” which was chosen for this report. Museums will want to be consistent in their terminology and ask community members their preferences.
- **“Seventy is the new fifty”** (and like phrases): These phrases are considered to be delusional. They gloss over the reality. We can’t expect a seventy-year-old to behave or look like a fifty-year-old, and we shouldn’t.
- **Silver Tsunami:** Some experts believe this phrase invokes fear of a torrential force that will wipe out everything in its path. They recommend against using it.
- **Super Geezer** (and like phrases): Phrases like this glorify the nonagenarians who traverse mountains, compete in triathlons, and parachute out of small airplanes, all while mastering two new languages a year. These comparisons create unfair expectations. As Ashton Applewhite says, “We just want to pay our bills and do things we love to do with the people we love.”⁴⁷

Appendix B

Creative Aging by the Numbers⁴⁸

Key Data Points through which to Understand Older Adults and Museums:

21%

Percentage of US population fifty-five or older

75%

Percentage of Americans aged fifty-five and older who are white

17%

Percentage of US population fifty-five or older who visit museums at least once a year

50%

Percentage of older adults who say they suffer from moderate or severe loneliness

7.5 years

Loss of life expectancy for people with a negative attitude about aging

40%

Percentage by which the risk of developing clinical dementia increases for seniors who report that they are moderately or severely lonely



75%

Percentage of older adults participating in creative aging classes who said they had made a new friend as a result of taking the class



A participant's artwork in Museum L-A's paper sculpture workshop. Courtesy: Museum L-A



Visiting the Library

Activity older people (fifty-five-plus) engage in more than younger people

Visiting Museums

Activity older people (fifty-five-plus) engage in less than younger people

2035

Year when the US will be populated with more adults over the age of sixty-five than children

2045

Year when the US will be populated with more people of color than white people

58

Median age of white people in the US as of 2018

27

Median age of people of color in the US as of 2018

80%

Percentage of state arts agencies who reported a high or very high demand for creative aging programs in their state

Appendix C

Additional Case Studies

In addition to the case studies presented in this report, [The Creative Aging Resources](#) website and American Alliance of Museums website feature case studies of creative aging programs from the following museums:

- **Louisiana State Museum**, New Orleans: [Beading with the Big Chief Darryl Montana at the Louisiana State Museum](#)
- **The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art**, Amherst, Massachusetts: [Create with The Carle! at The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art](#)
- **Los Angeles County Museum of Art**: [Create+Collaborate at LACMA](#)
- **John Kohler Michael Kohler Arts Center**, Sheboygan, Wisconsin: [A Local Chairmaking Tradition Inspires Older Adults](#)
- **MOCA, Tucson**: [The Benefits and Challenges of Producing Creative Aging Programs for the LGBTQIA+ Community](#)
- **National Museum of Mexican Art**, Chicago: [Viva La Vida: Creative Aging at the National Museum of Mexican Art](#)
- **The Neon Museum of Las Vegas**: [Celebrating Personal Histories: The Neon Museum's creative aging performance workshops](#)

Appendix D:

Additional Resources

- Age Strong Commission, Boston: <https://www.boston.gov/departments/age-strong-commission>
- American Association of Retired People: <http://aarp.org>
- Applewhite, Ashton (2021) "Ageist? Racist? Who, Me?: A Guide to Starting a Consciousness-Raising Group around the Intersection of Ageism and Racism" (oldschool.info): <https://oldschool.info/resource/ageist-racist-who-me>
- Applewhite, Ashton (2016) *This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto Against Ageism* (New York: Celadon Books).
- Cohen, Gene D. (2006). *The Mature Mind: The Positive Power of the Aging Brain*. (New York: Basic Books.)
- The Creative Aging Resource: <https://creativeagingresource.org/what-is-creative-aging/>
- *Gaining Momentum: A Communications Toolkit to Understand Aging*: <https://www.arohaphilanthropies.org/2020/01/10/gaining-momentum-a-communications-toolkit-to-understand-aging/>
- International Longevity Centre: <https://www.ilc-alliance.org/about/>
- Milken Center for the Future of Aging: <https://milkeninstitute.org/centers/center-for-the-future-of-aging>
- National Assembly of State Arts Agencies State Investments in Creative Aging Initiative: https://nasaa-arts.org/nasaa_research/creative-aging/
- National Assembly of State Arts Agencies Creative Aging Strategy Sampler: https://nasaa-arts.org/nasaa_research/creative-aging-strategy-sampler/
- National Council on Aging: <https://www.ncoa.org>
- National Endowment for the Arts, Summit on Creativity and Aging in America (2015): <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/summit-on-creative-aging-feb2016.pdf>
- Philadelphia Cultural Alliance: The Impact of Arts and Culture Agenda: Aging: https://philaculture.org/sites/default/files/GPCA-006_Agenda_Aging_FNL_PAGES.pdf
- Samuel, Lawrence R., "How We Can End Ageism in the Workplace," *Psychology Today*, 19 November 2020. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/boomers-30/202011/how-we-can-end-ageism-in-the-workplace>
- Scheie, David, Nan Kari and Erik Dosedel, "Vital at Every Age: Final Report on Seeding Vitality Arts" (April 16, 2020), ([Touchstone Center for Collaborative Inquiry](#)).
- Stanford Center on Longevity: <https://longevity.stanford.edu>
- World Health Organization (2021). *Global Report on Ageism*: <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240016866>

Appendix E

Participating Museums in Seeding Vitality Arts in Museums

- [Adventure Science Center](#), Nashville, Tennessee
- [Albuquerque Museum Foundation](#), Albuquerque, New Mexico
- [Anchorage Museum Association](#), Anchorage, Alaska
- [Craft Contemporary](#), Los Angeles, California
- [Garfield Park Conservatory Alliance](#), Chicago, Illinois
- [Heard Museum](#), Phoenix, Arizona
- [John Michael Kohler Arts Center](#), Sheboygan, Wisconsin
- [The Louisiana Museum Foundation](#), New Orleans, Louisiana
- [Museo de Historia, Antropología y Arte](#), San Juan, Puerto Rico
- [Museum of Contemporary Art, Tucson](#), Tucson, Arizona
- [Museum L-A](#), Lewiston, Maine
- [Naples Botanical Garden](#), Naples, Florida
- [National Museum of Mexican Art](#), Chicago, Illinois
- [The Neon Museum](#), Las Vegas, Nevada
- [Ohio History Connection](#), Columbus, Ohio
- [The Olana Partnership](#), Hudson, New York
- [Rutgers-Camden Center for the Arts](#), Camden, New Jersey
- [Smithsonian Institution](#), Washington, DC
- [Speed Art Museum](#), Louisville, Kentucky
- [Union County Historical Society and Heritage Museum](#), New Albany, Mississippi

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- **Molissa Udevitz**, Anchorage Museum of Art and History



Marjorie Schwarzer and her father, Allan Lefcowitz, at Aunt Jean's one-hundredth birthday celebration.

About the Author

Marjorie Schwarzer recently retired from the [University of San Francisco](#), where she served as Professor of Museum Studies and Administrative Director. She began her forty-year museum career as a graduate student intern at the Berkeley Art Museum and held leadership positions at Boston Children's Museum and Chicago Children's Museum. In 2018, she received a lifetime achievement award for museum leadership from the [Western Museums Association](#). Among Marjorie's many publications is her bestselling book, *[Riches, Rivals and Radicals: A History of Museums in the United States](#)* (third edition, 2020).

Marjorie comes from a long line of elders who exemplify the spirit of creative aging. They include her father, who launched a successful post-retirement career as a playwright, and her Aunt Jean, who at the age of eighty achieved her long-deferred dream of earning a high school diploma, and was elected valedictorian by her teenage classmates.

About Aroha Philanthropies



The mission of Aroha Philanthropies, a private foundation, is to awaken creative expression and build communities through the arts. Aroha's work focuses on arts learning for adults ages 55 and better, arts education programs for children and youth, and adult residential mental health and the arts. Aroha's *Vitality Arts* program empowers older adults to discover their creative capabilities and form meaningful connections with their communities. For more information, visit arohaphilanthropies.org

About the Alliance

The American Alliance of Museums has been bringing museums together since 1906, helping to develop standards and best practices, gathering and sharing knowledge, and providing advocacy on issues of concern to the entire museum community. Representing more than thirty-five thousand individual museum professionals and volunteers, institutions, and corporate partners serving the museum field, the Alliance stands for the broad scope of the museum community.

For more information on CFM and the Alliance, visit aam-us.org.

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