

Arts & Culture

Share this:

[Print](#)

by Anne Basting, Professor of Theatre, University of Wisconsin Milwaukee and President of TimeSlips Creative Storytelling



Overview

The arts and culture have intrinsic value. They enrich our lives by inviting us to express ourselves in new ways, and connect us through stories of a shared past and present and an imagined future. Through the arts, we can envision the world in new ways.

The field of arts, or more generally, creativity and aging, has grown significantly in the past decade thanks to conscious capacity-building efforts of foundations and nonprofits. The field tends to focus on three aspects of the arts & culture: 1) providing opportunities for learning and skill-building for those either new to the arts in later life or those professionals who seek to continue to grow as they age in their craft; 2) integrating arts practices into health care settings for their therapeutic benefits of social engagement, skill-building, and increasing self-esteem through self-expression and understanding; and 3) using the arts and design to build communities that are accessible and engaging for people of all ages and abilities.

For elders who might find their social networks shrinking, the arts and culture provide ways to stay engaged socially, civically, and psychologically in their communities. For elders with

cognitive disabilities, the arts provide a symbolic and emotionally expressive communication system that enables them to connect to their care partners and communities at large.

Programs range from established arts and culture organizations like the [Museum of Modern Art](#), which expanded its access and education programming to include older adults of all ages and abilities, to small non-profit groups of artists working with elders in dance, songwriting, or visual art workshops.

With continuing pressure on resources from the demographic changes, arts and culture organizations will become increasingly important as catalysts for meaningfully engaging older adults with their communities. Loneliness and social isolation are key challenges facing adults over 50 in the United States, with more people living alone than ever before in our history.

The focus on arts and culture in the field of aging is still relatively new. The longest-running organizations, including [Stagebridge](#) in Oakland, CA, began in the late 1970s in the swell of civil rights movement and the national actions of the Gray Panthers. Considerable work is needed to increase the number of organizations offering programs for older adults and to improve the quality of those programs. Research on the effect of arts and culture programs for older adults and their families is crucial if the field is to receive significant funds from government agencies and private foundation alike. While some research is beginning to show the positive impact of the arts, these studies remain small and their methodologies are not widely accepted by the scientific and policy communities. The majority of research in the field is on specific therapeutic interventions, provided by trained therapists in medical settings. While these interventions are clearly effective and should be more fully integrated into medical care practices, they are distinct from the larger field of arts and culture, which provide professional arts opportunities to elders wherever they live.



Philanthropic Support

Through the [Artist Outreach Project](#) in Encinitas, CA, the [Kenneth A. Picerne Foundation](#) awards grants to accomplished visual, performing, and literary artists age 55 and older. These grants are intended to support the artists' efforts to give back to their community. Artists awarded a grant spend six to eight hours a week with an underserved group served by a non-profit organization of their choice, sharing their talent in arts-based services that are both educational and therapeutic.

As part of its mission to ease social isolation among people over 50, the [AARP Foundation](#) has provided significant, multi-year support for [Lifetime Arts](#) and its offering of life-long learning through the arts for older adults through [community libraries](#).

Working with the National Center for Creative Aging, the MetLife Foundation has provided support to build the field through its [Leadership Award](#), which provides \$5,000 to winners in three categories: community, health and wellness, and life-long learning. Their Technical Assistance Site Grants similarly has provided aging or arts organizations funds to pay for training from Leadership Award winners.

The [Aroha Philanthropies](#) is “devoted to the transformative power of the arts and creativity” with a special focus on “inspiring vitality in those over 55.” Their funding has focused on supporting the training of teaching artists to engage older adults.

For 20 years, the Helen Bader Fund of the [Bader Philanthropies](#) has provided funding through its Alzheimer’s and Aging program, with consistent support to innovative arts and culture program development and research such as the Museum of Modern Art’s [Meet Me At MOMA](#) program and the creation of the [Spark Alliance](#), which is 15 museums and cultural institutions offering programs specifically for families with dementia across Wisconsin. Bader Philanthropies supported the development of a Student Artists in Residence program at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, in which arts students are trained to offer programming for elders in a range of settings, accessible to well elders and those with a range of disabilities.

Bader Philanthropies is also supporting the National Center for Creative Aging’s [Creative Caregiving initiative](#), developing easy, evidence-based video modules that enable family caregivers to use the arts to make a better quality day. Other funders of this initiative include the [Pabst Charitable Foundation for the Arts](#) and the [Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Foundation](#).

The [National Endowment for the Arts](#) supports arts programs targeted to aging and disabled populations through its [Art Works](#) program. These small grants are highly competitive and focus on community-engaged arts practices for all ages.

Trending Topics

Dementia and Age Friendly Communities: These initiatives are growing throughout the United States and the world, and strive to build partnerships to provide education and programs to engage older adults in a meaningful manner in their communities, regardless of disabilities. The arts have not yet been fully integrated into these initiatives, and could benefit from alliances between leading organizations in both fields. An exception is the [Fox Valley Memory Project](#) in Appleton, WI, which has built arts programming into its Memory Café structure and partnered with area museums to provide programming for families with dementia.

Cross-Sector Collaboration: New developments in the arts are focusing on using the skills of artists to engage cross-sector partnerships to enhance civic participation, improve public health, and strive for social justice. For example, the city of Minneapolis created a Director of Arts & Culture position to integrate artists into all civic areas – including housing, planning, and transportation. The [Kresge Foundation](#) and [ArtPlace](#) are supporting this and other “creative placemaking” initiatives.

Thus far, these initiatives have not targeted the integration of older adults and people with disabilities, who sometimes fall out of “civic participation” program models. Creative placemaking projects tap the skills of highly regarded, professional artists and infuse value into traditionally undervalued communities. There is great potential to expand the number and quality of artists working with older adults and to improve aging services by linking these growing areas through funding targeted at fostering collaborations between organizations like [CreativeTime](#) and the National Center for Creative Aging.

Arts at Home: Most arts programs for older adults were developed in communal care settings where artists can tap into an organizational structure and work with groups of elders. But the vast majority of elders live at home and increasingly are living alone. How can meaningful arts programming be offered to elders who choose not to or are unable to participate in group activities? The [Islands of Milwaukee](#), funded by [Bader Philanthropies](#), the [Greater Milwaukee Foundation](#), Art Works, and the [MAP Fund](#) (among others) aims to infuse the arts into care systems that reach elders, such as homecare, home-delivered meals, and volunteer phone and in-person visits. This area has tremendous growth potential.

Technology: Similarly, artists and arts organizations are now actively exploring how technology might expand the opportunities for older adults to participate in meaningful programming. [TimeSlips Creative Storytelling](#) offers free storytelling software on its website and is integrated into the software systems provided by [It's Never 2 Late](#), a company that provides touchscreen systems to long-term care providers. Selfhelp, based in New York, now offers [virtual senior centers](#) through iPad technology. The [Cleveland Museum of Art](#) offers virtual classrooms for arts education experiences to care communities.

The [Alzheimer's Poetry Project](#) and TimeSlips both offer online training for practitioners as a way to more efficiently spread the approaches across the country. The National Center for Creative Aging offers online training for artists and soon online programs for family caregivers. But the potential of technology to provide meaningful engagement through the arts is just beginning to be tapped.

Building Business Models: Artists are commonly asked to provide their services for free. The underfunding of our long-term care systems combined with the care needs for our growing population of older adults adds to the pressure for artists to volunteer their time or be replaced by volunteers. There has been growing interest at the conferences of the National Center for Creative Aging in business models that enable artists to make a living wage for their work in the community.

Research: Fostering collaborations between researchers and artists can provide enormous benefit to the field. The [Pabst Foundation](#)'s work with the University of Central Florida on the [Caregiver's Tool Kit initiative](#) is an example of such a fruitful partnership. Solid research is expensive, and funders entering the field to support arts and aging programs might blush at the price tag. But engaging researchers in smaller-scale, pilot studies of arts and aging programs can provide them the footing to apply for larger government funds in the future.

Source: **Anne Basting, TimeSlips Creative Storytelling** November 2015

Resources

The [Grantmakers in the Arts](#) web site has a section on [arts and aging](#)

[Arts for the Aging](#)

[Lifetime Arts](#)

[Catalyzing Creative Aging](#) - a program of the National Guild for Community Arts Education

[EngAGE](#)

Publications

[Dementia-Friendly America: Community Toolkit](#)

[Arts and Aging - Building the Science](#), National Endowment for the Arts

[Creativity Matters: The Arts and Aging Toolkit](#)