



National Center for Creative Aging

Green Paper: Aging Creatively in the 21st Century

America's Changing Demographics

2010 is a pivotal year in America: it represents the first year in which citizens over the age of 65 outnumber those under the age of 20; next year, 2011, represents the first year in which the Baby Boom generation turns 65. In addition to the generational shift, Americans are living longer than ever before. In 1900 the average lifespan of an adult was 47.3 years, which rose to 76.9 years by 2000. The fastest-growing segment of America's population is the over-85 cohort: between 2000 and 2040, the number of Americans in this age range is expected to grow by more than 300% from 4.3 million to 19.4 million.

The "graying" of America is already a familiar concept to arts administrators, who are actively discussing the nationwide wave of emerging leadership that will occur in the next two decades as founders and senior staff of non-profits reach retirement age. This green paper represents the other side of the discussion about the generational shift—how will older adults remain creatively and actively engaged throughout their entire lifespan? And how will we capture the wisdom of our aging population to ensure that our collective knowledge base and culture is retained and passed on for the benefit of future generations?

Creative Aging, What's That?

The field of creative aging is a new sector in the arts industry, emerging recently within the last decade. It is a field that acknowledges the vital link between creativity and quality of life for older adults, regardless of economic status, age, or level of physical, emotional, or cognitive functioning.

Creative aging represents a paradigm shift: affirming and celebrating the inherent creative potential in older adults rather than focusing on the problems associated with aging. Creativity is an intrinsic human ability, which can be nurtured throughout life—even when memory fails. Creativity strengthens morale, enhances physical health and enriches relationships. It also constitutes the greatest legacy people can leave to their children, grandchildren and society as a whole; elders have historically functioned as keepers of the culture who pass on the history and values of a community to the next generation.

In its few short years of existence, the field of creative aging is steadily building momentum. The first multi-site longitudinal study of the impact of professionally conducted, participatory cultural programs on older adults was initiated by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in 2001 and directed by Dr. Gene Cohen, a pioneer of the field of creative aging. The statistically significant findings of this study demonstrated that arts participants had better health, made fewer doctor visits, reduced medication usage and increased activities and social engagement. In 2005 the NEA convened the White House Mini-Conference on Creativity and Aging to make recommendations to the White House Conference on Aging, and 2006 marked the publication of *Creativity Matters! The Arts and Aging Toolkit*, a collaborative effort between the National Guild for Community Arts Education, the New Jersey Performing Arts Center and the National Center for Creative Aging (NCCA). The sector continues to grow through conferences, symposia and webinars.

While not bound to the perspective of problems, creative aging sector acknowledges that the complications of aging are inevitable, and therefore the field of creative aging is closely linked to the fields of art therapy, arts in healthcare and arts access. Creative ways to either overcome the challenges of aging or greet them with acceptance are made available through partnerships with these sectors.

Redefining the “Senior Moment”

As a young field, a significant challenge for creative aging is one of recognition; but once introduced to the concept, most individuals find it to be an easy—and delightful—concept to grasp.

A far larger and more deeply rooted challenge to the creative aging paradigm is to correct the misunderstandings about aging that are ingrained in our culture and language.

Contrary to the figure of speech, you *can* teach old dogs new tricks; as it turns out, the older dog is actually the smarter dog! In his 2005 book, *The Mature Mind*, Dr. Gene Cohen documents recent discoveries in neuroscience that radically challenge conventional assumptions about the aging brain. For example, though it is true that the brain loses neurons throughout life, studies have shown that it is not the number of neurons that determines intellectual capacity, but rather the connections between neurons. These connections, known as dendrites, are tiny branches of the neurons that grow and develop when the brain is exposed to a rich, stimulating environment. Studies have shown that between one's early 50s and late 70s, the number and length of dendrites actually increases. In the presence of stimulation and absence of disease, a person's intelligence grows with each passing day.

Ageism—like racism—has been entrenched in American culture, and it will take decades to reinvent the face of aging. It can be seen on greeting card racks and in television programming; it is widely accepted even by older adults themselves, concealing gray hairs and wrinkles and explaining away memory gaps with the self-deprecating phrase: "I'm having a senior moment." The creative aging paradigm suggests instead that there is beauty in advanced age, and senior moments can be wonderful moments: a chance to be fully present and "break free from the imprisonment of sequential thinking" (Susan Moon, *This Is Getting Old*, Boston, MA, 2010). Rather than a sign of decline, a senior moment is a gap in linear thought that allows for holistic thinking: the trademark of creativity. Indeed, Dr. Gene Cohen defines the "new senior moment" as "a time of life which many older individuals experience as their 'moment,' a new period in their life where they shine or come into their own."

Beyond 30: The Longevity Revolution

Ageism may be deeply rooted in American culture, but the pending generational shift coupled with increasing longevity bodes well for the creative aging sector. As the generation that reinvented the meaning of youth in America celebrates its 30th anniversary of turning 30, we can be certain that they will reinvent what it means to be an older adult in America.

Policy makers and funders are also taking note of the changing generational tide, and new opportunities for collaborations between the arts and aging services are already in motion. Arts organizations don't need to reinvent themselves to participate in this new market, rather they can build upon their already strong foundations of arts in education, community building and social engagement. Creativity in aging programs are fundable through arts, humanities, education, social service, public health, civic engagement, workforce development, wellness and intergenerational programs. Creativity in aging programs can also receive support from organizations that address cultural competency; healthcare, including treating memory loss and caring for the caregiver; respite care; access/disability services; and aging services.

A new horizon is upon us with opportunities for the arts to be profoundly involved in the Longevity Revolution. The ability to provide services for this demographic will yield greater engagement by older Americans and add to the vibrancy of the nation's communities. Arts organizations across the nation are a bank of resources that will allow the next generation of older adults to age gracefully—moving beyond 30 and creating a cultural legacy for generations to come.

For further reading refer to the monograph *Creativity Matters: Arts and Aging in America* published by Americans for the Arts in 2008.