



## Vitality Arts

*A Briefing for the 2018 NASAA Assembly  
November 3, 2018*

### About Aroha Philanthropies

We're a private foundation based in Minneapolis with a long history of giving to the arts and arts education.

### Today's Agenda

In our session today, I'd like to do four things:

- First, describe this work and its context;
- Second, share Aroha's strategies, programs and early outcomes;
- Third, introduce you to the training and technical assistance provided by our partner Lifetime Arts; and
- Fourth, invite you to consider making this work a priority in your agency.

As state arts agencies, you work every day to ensure that everyone in your state has access to the arts. You are applying the lenses of diversity, equity and inclusion in your planning and decisions to make the arts relevant and important.

Today, we're here to talk about part of that "everyone," a group that is generally not acknowledged as underserved: older adults.

You undoubtedly know that the older population is growing dramatically, due to both longer lives and low birth rates. Today, about 1 in 7 people in the U.S. are over 65. By 2030, it will be 1 in 4. This is true on a global basis as well. In 2020, there will be more people over 65 than under 5, worldwide. This is not a temporary situation, and its implications are enormous.

Before I launch into a description of our work, let me set it in the context of the arts ecosystem. For the past 50+ years, the work of arts and cultural institutions has centered on providing professional arts productions or exhibitions for audiences to enjoy. Today, the role of our cultural institutions is broadening, from that of providing arts experiences for the community to facilitating the creative and expressive lives of our richly varied communities. I believe this is a major paradigm shift that is only beginning to emerge. Creative aging is not merely an example of this, but a bellwether of change to come.

Before we began funding, we spent a year learning about creative aging - and our best tutors were my co-presenter, Maura O'Malley and her business partner Ed Friedman, who had founded Lifetime Arts several years earlier.

A few themes emerged.

## **Research**

First, research had already shown the benefits of art-making for the health and wellbeing of older adults. Many of you know that Gene Cohen, in collaboration with the NEA, studied several multi-session, teaching artist-led participatory arts education programs for older adults. Cohen's research showed that older adults who participated in these programs had improved cognition with respect to both memory and executive function, improved quality of life, and improved well-being. People in these programs used fewer medications, had fewer doctor visits, and suffered fewer falls than their counterparts.

Importantly, Cohen's study identified the characteristics that made these programs so beneficial for participants. These are programs that allow participants to gain a sense of mastery - at some level - in work that was complex and new to them, and through which they made new or stronger friendships.

Those friendships are game-changers. Social isolation, we learned, is one of the biggest contributors to physical, emotional and mental health problems in older adults. It's frequently referred to as "the new smoking," because its effects are so dire.

## **Leadership + Infrastructure**

Second, when we began learning about creative aging in 2013, the field had very little philanthropic leadership. Some of you may know that MetLife Foundation had been a generous and visible funder of creative aging programs in prior years, but that company moved on to other things and the support suddenly evaporated.

Third, although creative aging programs were springing up organically around the country, there was little common language, definition of best practices or infrastructure to support the field. Usually, arts programs were one-offs: "Join us for a one-hour painting class." We know that's not really how you learn to create.

Fourth, we realized that few arts or senior-serving organizations had experience collaborating with one another.

## **Ageism**

Fifth, we learned that society's expectations of older adults' capacities and interests was extremely low. When you say the words "creative aging," pretty much everyone immediately associates it with dementia care. In the past decade, many important and noteworthy programs rooted in the arts have sprung up to support older adults dealing with dementia. These include Meet Me at MOMA, Timeslips, the Alzheimer's Poetry Project, programs that support caregivers, choruses for dementia patients and their caregivers, and more.

In reality, however, fully 85% of older adults live independently and are cognitively fit well into their mid-80s and beyond.

The constant association of “aging” with “dementia” reinforces negative assumptions about the abilities of older adults. The dementia-focused programs, while necessary, but not sufficient to address the needs of the vast majority of older adults.

Which brings me to ageism - which is still pervasive, socially acceptable and demonstrably harmful. In our culture, we don't view older adults as creative, contributing, learners. We see only the losses.

The paradigm around aging has to change.

We saw that we needed to challenge outdated beliefs and create a new narrative regarding aging. We believed the arts were part of the answer, and so we set out on this path.

By funding and advocating for creative aging, we hope to help many more people understand that aging is about growth, not just decline; about opportunities, not just challenges; and about the contributions older people can and do make.

### **Aroha's Focus**

We chose to focus on the sector that we believe holds the most promise for older adults - the one that was supported by the research I mentioned earlier. It's also the one that could be experienced by the most people - and it was one that wasn't being addressed by other funders.

Simply put, we chose to champion programs that enable active older adults to learn, make, and share the arts. These programs are based on the same arts education principles that drive youth arts education, including sequential learning over a period of time, but they are tailored to the unique strengths and needs of older adults.

### **What Are Vitality Arts?**

At Aroha, we use the term “Vitality Arts” to refer to these types of creative aging programs. Vitality Arts programs empower active older adults to dive into learning an art form in an environment that fosters community, friendship and engagement.

These programs include virtually any art form: collage, poetry, dance, graffiti (yes!), choral music, instrumental music, painting, memoir, storytelling, acting, playwriting, improv, drawing and much more.

### **Aroha's Work to Date**

Here is a snapshot of what we've done over the past four plus years:

- \$7 million in direct grants
- >\$1 million in direct charitable activity, including convening and advocacy
- Curation of numerous resources on creative aging for our web site, [vitalityarts.org](http://vitalityarts.org)
- Production of several short, shareable videos that can be downloaded through our web site
- Development of the Seeding Vitality Arts initiative

### **Seeding Vitality Arts**

In 2016, we designed and launched our Seeding Vitality Arts initiative to encourage the development of new programs across the country. We began with the end in mind: we want to create a new narrative that shows that these arts programs are transformational, and that they can be offered successfully in a wide array of settings. “Seeding Vitality Arts” is multi-faceted: it’s a grant program, a demonstration project and a capacity-building effort.

Program Components:

- Seed new programs
- Cohort model of shared learning
  - Seeding Vitality Arts U.S.
  - Seeding Vitality Arts MN
  - Seeding Vitality Arts in Museums
- Training and support by Lifetime Arts
- Evaluation resources

The launch of “Seeding Vitality Arts” has shown us that the appetite for this work and the need to support it is enormous. Our first RFP resulted in more than 200 applications from over 40 states.

Arts applicants included arts councils, museums, dance companies, writing workshops, independent schools and colleges, theater companies, music education organizations, opera companies, and many more.

We also received applications from many senior-serving organizations, such as senior housing communities and senior centers, that wanted to partner with arts organizations or teaching artists. These organizations all were eager to encourage the arts, but they lacked the capacity to do so.

### **Seeding Vitality Arts: Outcomes**

During the first year of programming by the first cohort, grantees collected post-program surveys from nearly 750 of program participants. We asked these participants about their perceptions of the impact these programs had on them. The vast majority reported gains in creative expression, mental engagement, and confidence. Two-thirds reported new or strengthened relationships with others - a key outcome given the prevalence of social isolation among older people.

More than 80% reported gains in multiple aspects of artistic and personal development.

Richard Hood of Johnson City, Tennessee, joined a sculpting class offered by one of our first Vitality Arts grantees. He wrote:

*I turned out to be a fairly typical example of the suddenly solitary old geezer. After a long and happy career, I suddenly found myself out of work (retired), out of family (my daughter moved to Texas and I lost my wife), out of community contacts (I moved to Tennessee from Ohio to help out my 100-year-old father), and basically out of life.*

*The class was supposed to be “fun,” but it was, in fact, fun because it mattered. (And, as a general truth, I think this is the only way we can attack this chronic loneliness in elders: provide a place where we can be taken seriously enough to have to work hard according to high standards.)*

*We need community, respect, rigor, and real interaction on sophisticated levels with imaginative, involved people who expect us to be the same.*

## **Seeding Vitality Arts in Museums: Partnership with the American Alliance of Museums**

Our third Seeding Vitality Arts cohort has just launched. From 120 proposals, we selected 20 museums from Alaska to Puerto Rico. They join us in Minneapolis the first week of November for 2 days of training, which will be provided by Lifetime Arts.

We're particularly excited that our new national partner, the American Alliance of Museums, will convene 150 museums in 2019 to address this topic. They will also recruit a two-year fellow to research, communicate and oversee this project. We're proud to fund this national effort to bring creative aging into the mainstream of American museums of all kinds.

## **Benefits to Arts Organizations**

Our arts grantees have already noted some big benefits of the program. Some have said that this work is causing them to re-examine their relationships with their adult audiences. They're seeing participants develop intense engagement with the organizations. And they're building new collaborations.

We believe that this work can benefit the health of the arts ecosystem for several reasons:

- By unleashing and facilitating the creative expression of our richly diverse communities, we are finding a route to deeper, more authentic community engagement.
- Arts and cultural organizations can create successful cross-sector collaborations with organizations serving huge numbers of older adults, including public libraries, state aging services, senior centers, senior housing providers and more. Many of these sectors have their own funding sources.
- Experiencing the arts as a maker, not just as audience, deepens our relationship with the arts.
- And let's not forget: older adults make great advocates. And they vote.

## **We Have Many Stories**

One of our arts grantees wrote:

*"We have many stories from those who experienced a level of joy, engagement, activity and accomplishment that they thought were a thing of the past... this program positively impacted participants in ways we hoped for and in ways we had not even dared to dream... they experienced a new lease on life that cannot be quantified."*

A participant wrote:

*"It's hard to put into words what this class meant to me. I lost my husband in 2008 to lung cancer. I lost myself also. Now I feel hope... you changed the rest of my life!"*

With that, I'll turn this over to Maura O'Malley, CEO of our partner Lifetime Arts. Maura will help us understand what's needed to create successful programs like these. Thank you again for your interest.

Respectfully submitted,

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