Creative Aging in NYC

A project of Brookdale Center for Healthy Aging,
Lifetime Arts, and LiveOn NY
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Table of Contents

➢ Overview

➢ Research Methods

➢ Findings

➢ Recommendations

All quotes and photos are those of SU-CASA participants. Quotes are anonymous. Photos are not images of the participants whose quotes are included.

Photos by Jeremy Amar and Julia Xanthos Liddy.

"There is a social setting that you need, we all need."

Overview

The purpose of this report is to promote the evidence for the benefits of creative aging for:

➤ Older adults who participate
➤ Institutions that provide it (cultural organizations, senior centers, and others)
➤ Neighborhoods in which it occurs

Our goal is to broaden support for creative aging with the perspective that creative aging is a natural for NYC and a win for older adults, the organizations that serve them, the arts in NYC, and neighborhoods all over town.

This report is a product of the NYC Creative Aging Initiative, a two-year collaboration (2018-2019) among Hunter College's Brookdale Center for Healthy Aging, Lifetime Arts, and LiveOn NY. The New York Community Trust funded the initiative to strengthen and advance the field of creative aging in New York City, with a focus on the SU-CASA arts program, which brings teaching artists to senior centers across the five boroughs.

What Is Creative Aging?

Creative aging refers to programs promoting arts participation by older adults. Creative aging as exemplified by SU-CASA is based on five principles:

➢ The instructor is a working artist and trained teacher, knowledgeable about the concepts of creative aging.

➢ The instruction is sequential, each lesson building on the one before.

➢ The class builds toward a culminating event.

➢ The teaching artist encourages creativity and experimentation.

➢ The class promotes social engagement.

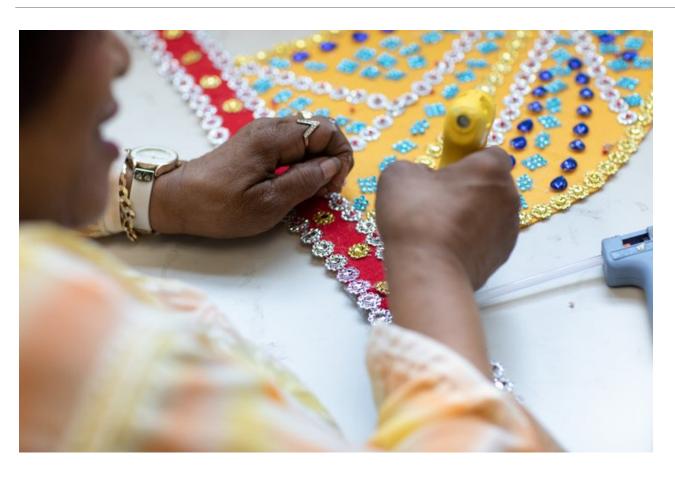"Knowing that I have to come here, it makes me get up."

What Is Creative Aging?

The field of creative aging grew out of the Creativity and Aging Study by Gene Cohen and colleagues (2006), funded by the National Endowment for the Arts. The study was based on the theory that arts participation stimulates social engagement and contributes to older adults' sense of control or mastery, which in turn promotes well-being. The arts can also showcase older adults in a new light: One of the programs in that study, Elders Share the Arts, was founded by Susan Perlstein in 1979 as an effort to combat ageist stereotypes and show older people as "keepers of culture" (Jeffri & Hanna, 2016).

The focus on positive aging in healthy adults differentiates creative aging from the practice of art therapy or hospital-based art programs, which focus on healing.

Creative aging is starting to thrive in New York City. The research outlined in this paper takes the pulse of this effort and leads to recommendations for building on its success.

What Is the Scope of Creative Aging in NYC?

➢ SU-CASA

➢ Other arts opportunities

SU-CASA

Funded by the New York City Council, SU-CASA has grown from a small demonstration project arising out of Age-Friendly NYC in 2010 to the largest public participatory arts program for older adults in the United States, with programs in 224 centers around New York City.

SU-CASA provides grants to artists and cultural organizations to bring stimulating interactive arts programs to neighborhood senior centers (and other senior-serving organizations) across the five boroughs of NYC. SU-CASA has two arms:

1. The City Council designates funds for cultural organizations, which are vetted for appropriate credentials by the Department of Cultural Affairs, the Department for the Aging, and community partners. Each City Council member then designates three vetted organizations to run programs in designated senior centers.

2. The City Council designates funds to the five borough arts councils, which then distribute grants on a competitive basis to independent teaching artists to run programs in designated senior centers.

Participants engage in a focused creative project, designed by the teaching artists, over a 40- or 60-hour program and work toward a public event, where they share their work with the community through a performance or exhibition.

Other arts opportunities

SU-CASA presents a tremendous opportunity for older New Yorkers to participate in the arts, but it's not the only game in town. Creative aging programs with different program structures come from a variety of sources and are offered in different settings:

➢ Libraries

➢ Cultural organizations with programs for older adults

➢ Senior-serving organizations with arts programs

➢ Educational organizations

➢ Other nonprofits

➢ Inspired independent efforts in various locations

Brooklyn Public Library

The Brooklyn Public Library offers 8- to 10-week artist-led workshops that follow a sequential learning model and include a culminating event. Designed for adults 50 and older, with no experience necessary, classes include theater and improvisation, singing and dance, painting and watercolor, ceramics, photography, nonfiction writing, and storytelling. In 2018, the library system served almost 700 older adults across 35 programs.

Each branch selects its classes based on community input, and classes are available in Spanish, Chinese, Creole, Polish, Russian, Hebrew, and Japanese. "Diversity is a fun challenge," says Taina Evans, coordinator of Older Adult Services, of the effort to provide classes in the appropriate languages and subjects across the system. The library continually evaluates its programs; participants almost unanimously rated them "excellent" when surveyed. Participants commonly reported that the classes had increased their skills and led to new friendships.

For those who are homebound, the library works with DOROT's University Without Walls program to offer remote access courses in four-session series. Students receive art supplies in the mail and participate in exercises during classes by phone or videoconference, then work on their projects between sessions.

"I like that it is hard. I get nervous, but I love it."

Research Methods

In Brookdale's two-year engagement with the Creative Aging Initiative, we gathered evidence about SU-CASA and the broader creative aging ecosystem in different ways:

Observations and conversations

➢ **Structured observations and interviews** in 90 SU-CASA classes at 90 senior centers in 2018:
  ◦ Observing the extent to which they followed the principles of creative aging programming
  ◦ Assessing the perspectives of the teaching artists, senior center staff, and cultural organizations on arts education for older adults in general and SU-CASA specifically
➢ **Focus groups** of SU-CASA class participants at 6 senior centers across the 5 boroughs in 2019
➢ **Key informant interviews** with older adults, teaching artists, senior center staff, representatives of cultural organizations and the borough arts councils, representatives of the agencies responsible for administering SU-CASA, providers of non-SU-CASA arts programming for older adults, and other stakeholders, to gain a rounded perspective
➢ A **synthesis** of the findings from these sources

Research Methods

A scan of the scientific literature

We applied evidence from relevant research to specific questions about the benefits of creative aging for older adults, institutions, and neighborhoods.

Recommendations from stakeholders

The creative aging collaboration team convened teaching artists, representatives of cultural organizations, senior center directors, borough arts council leaders, and older adults for a joint discussion about how to strengthen SU-CASA and the creative aging ecosystem in NYC.

"I know that if I do music it will help—I will live longer."

Findings

THE EVIDENCE BRINGS US TO FOUR SALIENT CONCLUSIONS.

1. Creative aging is a natural for NYC.

Creative aging is a natural for NYC

➢ New York's thriving arts scene is one of its defining characteristics and a cornerstone of its identity, bringing millions of visitors each year and attracting a steady stream of new residents.

➢ Desire to join the arts scene (whether as artists or audience members) was a central draw to NYC for many of the people now aging here.

➢ NYC is a global hub of artistic talent, creating a deep workforce to staff a wide variety of arts programs.

➢ NYC has a broad infrastructure for arts education, including its three library systems and its 250+ senior centers.

➢ Engagement with the arts brings older adults into contact with an essential part of the experience of living in New York City.

➢ Older adults' participation can benefit arts organizations—with necessary funding and inspiration about a new audience—as well as the older adults.

➢ Strengthening the arts strengthens communities.

Creative aging is a natural for NYC

Evidence

➢ Nearly 300,000 people were working in arts and culture in the city in 2013—not counting those with a different day job (Center for an Urban Future, 2015).

➢ NYC is home to 18,000 for-profit cultural firms and more than 4,700 cultural nonprofits (Stern & Seifert, 2017).

➢ "Culture makes a difference in neighborhood communities by stimulating social interaction, amplifying community voice, animating the public environment, and shaping public culture" (Stern & Seifert, 2017, p. V-2).

➢ By promoting civic engagement, cultural resources may have spillover effects that contribute to well-being (Stern & Seifert, 2017).
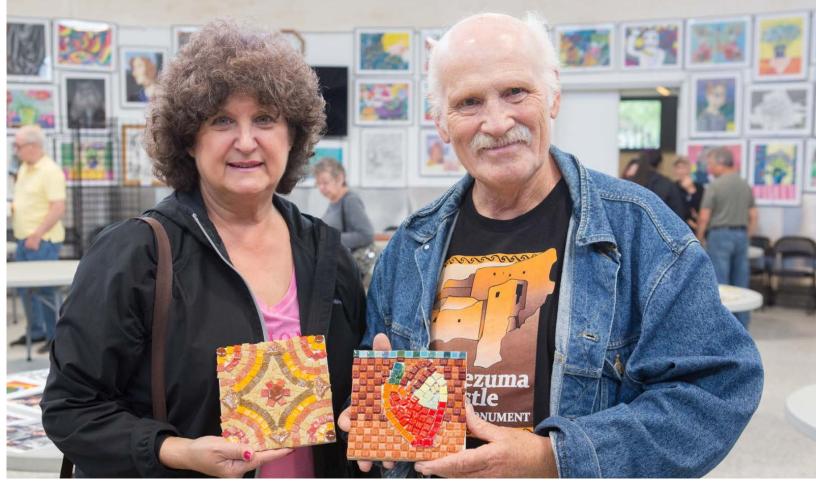
CASE STUDY

Seniors in Motion

Some arts programs spring from unexpected sources. Detective Josie Ruiz, of the New York Police Department's Community Affairs Bureau, has been on the lookout for ways to reach older adults across the city, including a twice-yearly luncheon called Aged to Perfection. She knew Pregones / Puerto Rican Traveling Theater from her childhood, and she stopped in one day to ask them what they do for seniors.

Pregones, which ran four SU-CASA programs in the Bronx in 2019, worked with her to start Seniors in Motion at the Frederick Samuel Community Center in Harlem. Each spring, a group of 4 to 10 participants create their own musical and build toward a performance, along the same lines as SU-CASA.

Detective Ruiz advertises with Spanish and English fliers in senior centers in Police Service Area 6, between 116th and 145th Streets. In the neighborhood, Community Affairs officers, who work to strengthen community relationships and trust, pick up participants and bring them to the program. If transportation were not an issue, she would love to draw people from across the city.

"I come, I walk slowly, but I come."

2. Participants rave about creative aging programs and their benefits.

Participants rave about creative aging

The people who participate in creative aging programs report numerous benefits beyond those of senior center attendance alone.

Evidence

➢ Participants in SU-CASA focus groups spoke of being rejuvenated and of reinventing themselves, sometimes after periods of sickness or struggle.

➢ SU-CASA participants wanted to avoid isolation at home after retirement. One woman said, "Las paredes embrutecen" (*The walls dull your senses*). The art projects created a community—in one program, participants wrote a song together about their lives—and the friendships they made in the classes extended beyond the senior center. One woman picked up her friend at 8 a.m. on class days to be sure they'd be in class by 9:30. Members of another group went to jazz clubs together.

➢ The SU-CASA focus groups mirrored other qualitative research on creative aging programs. For example, a participant in an art class for older adults in San Antonio said, "Making art, it is like taking a vitamin for your entire body, it is very good" (Cantu & Fleuriet, 2018, p. 126).

Participants rave about creative aging

There is some quantitative research that supports participants' perceptions.

➤ A series of well-designed studies found that at the end of a tailored theater program, older adult participants had higher scores than a control group on **personal growth**, **problem solving**, **verbal fluency**, and three out of four **memory** tests (Noice, Noice, & Staines, 2004; Noice & Noice, 2009; Noice & Noice, 2013).

➤ Brain imaging shows that the learning component of music or visual art training can boost brain plasticity and lead to changes in older adults' brain function, potentially improving **essential cognitive skills** such as processing speed (Alain et al., 2019).

Participants rave about creative aging

➤ In a Dutch study of 35 older adults, those randomly assigned to a six-month weekly dance course performed better than control group members in several cognitive domains (including **memory**, **attention**, and **nonverbal learning**) and on two physical measures (**hand-motor skills** and **posture**) (Kattenstroth et al., 2013).

➤ In a random assignment study of 390 older adults in senior centers in the San Francisco area, participants in a 44-week choir program experienced a **reduction in loneliness** and **increased interest in life** after six months (Johnson et al., 2018).

➤ In a large random assignment study in England, a three-month community singing program resulted in **improved mental health** and **reduced levels of depression and anxiety** (Coulton et al., 2015).

"You thought we were good now—the final product is going to be amazing!"

3. Older adults at all senior-serving organizations deserve SU-CASA at its best.

CASE STUDY

Our Time Together weaving class

At Hugh Gilroy Neighborhood Senior Center in Weeksville, Brooklyn, participants in the SU-CASA weaving class, called Our Time Together, took to it so well that the teaching artist, Jamie Boyle, had to hustle to keep up. Boyle credits the center director at the time, Leishanna Lawrence, for knowing her community and requesting a program they would like—even if, at first, some were skeptical of their ability to weave. Lawrence also promoted it well, with a lot of announcements.

Boyle had 11 people in her first class, and the class grew as they recruited more friends, she said—"once it was deemed fun in the room." While she had planned a course of sequential learning, the enthusiastic participants took over and treated it as more of a creative activity than a class, even as they grabbed up new ideas. "I view that as a failure and a success," she said.

Boyle encouraged participants to see their work as art by bringing a frame to class and putting the finished pieces in the frame. She also tried to cultivate a feeling of what an artist's studio is like. At the culminating exhibition, the artists displayed 61 weavings. Rather than bask in their glory, they wanted to spend that time weaving more. But after someone took the first photo of a weaver with her art, Boyle said, "pride swelled."

Everyone deserves SU-CASA at its best

SU-CASA is a phenomenal public investment. By funding five programs in each of NYC's 51 Council districts, SU-CASA makes arts opportunities available in neighborhoods all across the city. The city's extensive senior center system provides a built-in way to accommodate arts programming everywhere. Yet more attention is needed to address inequities in resources at different centers.

Everyone deserves SU-CASA at its best

Evidence

Visits to senior centers with SU-CASA programs demonstrated that some have greater capacity, in terms of staff and/or facilities, than others.

➢ Some centers have dedicated art studios of various kinds; others have only one or two rooms to host all their activities. For example, the singing class at one center was held in a dedicated music room, while the singing class at another center was in a cramped area at one end of the main lunch and activity room, next to the restrooms and maintenance closets, because that's where the piano was.

➢ Some centers have rich arts and learning programs in addition to the SU-CASA class or classes, while others have only the SU-CASA program, so they have arts programming for only a few months of the year. It stands to reason that the senior center staff and volunteers have more built-in resources and experience with running effective arts programming in centers where they do a lot of it.

"I don't want the program to end because there's so much more to learn."

Everyone deserves SU-CASA at its best

➢ And, at the same time, centers with a lot of arts programming have cultivated an audience for that programming—older adults learn to embrace the opportunity—while older adults at centers with occasional and sporadic programming attend the center for other reasons, with arts programming appearing as an unexpected bonus.

➢ Centers with a lot of arts experience:
  ◦ are aware of the annual SU-CASA process and how to request specific programs for their center,
  ◦ have had the opportunity to learn more about what programs their members are interested in,
  ◦ know how to market culminating events, and
  ◦ are able to market effectively to repeat customers and those who have attended culminating events.

➢ Centers with fewer resources do not have these capacities. Although the geographic dispersal of SU-CASA is a benefit, success begets success. It also stands to reason that those centers without the needed capacity may be located in areas with the lowest amount of resources, and therefore where art could have the greatest impact.

Everyone deserves SU-CASA at its best

➤ The City Council, DFTA, and DCLA do a remarkable job of matching the right artists and programs to NYC's very diverse senior centers—*most* of the time. Every year, however, there are linguistic, project, and infrastructure mismatches (for example, a digital photographer in a center with no computers; clay in a center with no kiln; teaching artists and students with no language in common).

These patterns are apparent in the NYC arts world more broadly.

➤ While every neighborhood has a cultural scene, arts resources are far greater in Manhattan below 125th Street and in neighborhoods near downtown Brooklyn than in the rest of the city: "The dominant pattern is one of privilege generating more privilege" (Stern & Seifert, 2017, p. VI-6).

➤ Yet research suggests that cultural resources may carry more bang for the buck in terms of social well-being in lower-income neighborhoods, where they promote social connection and therefore social capital, than in higher-income neighborhoods where residents have greater economic resources (Stern & Seifert, 2017).

"I saw the guitar and I said, that's it. I'm going to reinvent myself."

4. SU-CASA is ready for an infrastructure upgrade.

SU-CASA is ready for an upgrade

Given the three points just discussed:

➢ Creative aging is a natural for NYC

➢ Participants rave about the programs and their benefits

➢ All senior centers deserve SU-CASA at its best

It makes sense to lean in and build on the success of this program—which means improving the infrastructure for administration, training, capacity building, marketing, and linkage to New York City's broader cultural life.

SU-CASA is ready for an upgrade

Evidence

➢ The borough arts councils report difficulties making contact with the senior centers that have been granted SU-CASA programs. Each arts council must establish a process to reach out to the senior centers to learn their preferences in order to make good matches. This outreach is important in marketing both the program to participants and the culminating event to the wider community. This step often involves explaining the procedures and goals of the program to the centers, sometimes every year, because staff turnover can be high and staff members may not have time to attend SU-CASA training sessions, given their many other responsibilities at the center.

"With all the singing, dancing and all the camaraderie, it makes me happy."

SU-CASA is ready for an upgrade

➤ The selection process and structure of SU-CASA were topics of animated conversation in focus groups and interviews with stakeholders. Participants suggested opportunities for improvement in several areas:

◦ **Clarity.** Many called for more clarity in the selection process. Senior centers sometimes do not know how to apply for a program or do not know they have been selected for one.

◦ **Continuity.** There is no process for an artist to continue or return to a center where the program has been a great success.

◦ **Timeline.** The program timeline was a challenge for center directors, teaching artists, and participants. Delays in announcements of the program selections mean that programs must be condensed into a shorter period. Teaching artists have less time to get to know the center and ensure that the program will work well for the participants.

SU-CASA is ready for an upgrade

◦ **Training.** While many teaching artists and some senior center staff members have attended training on creative aging, there is not a consistent level of knowledge. Staff members who understood the program, and who were provided clear information about it, were better able to promote the program and help it run smoothly.

◦ **Marketing the exhibition or performance.** Some culminating events were widely attended and a source of pride to participants. Others struggled for an audience.

◦ **Teacher satisfaction.** Most teaching artists observed and interviewed were enthusiastic, energetic, and talented; however, some reported resentments stemming from the hardships of working in a program where they struggle with the level of pay, delays in getting paid, and the need to cover supplies out of their own pocket.

◦ **Feedback.** After the effort they expended over the course of the program, teachers and administrators wanted more feedback to know specifically what was working and what was not.

SU-CASA is ready for an upgrade

➢ SU-CASA participants in focus groups were enthusiastic about their programs and thankful for them. They had no idea of the breadth of the program and were eager to know what programs were available at other centers. There were reports of other senior center members saying they would have joined the program if they had known about it.

➢ Teaching artists and organizations have noted that it can be difficult to live up to the creative aging ideal. For example, they have noted that attendance is not consistent, a theme reflected in the SU-CASA class observations. Program directors have pointed out that some senior center members prefer classes on a drop-in basis.

➢ Program implementers and participants do not understand how all the parts of SU-CASA fit together. Senior center directors did not always know if they had a SU-CASA program or not and certainly did not know whom to contact when they had questions about it.

"I feel beautiful here, because I am the artist."

Recommendations

Infrastructure

Administration

➢ SU-CASA needs a single entity charged with providing administrative support to the City Council, the Department of Cultural Affairs (DCLA), and the Department for the Aging (DFTA), as well as the borough arts councils, cultural organizations, and senior centers implementing SU-CASA. No single office currently serves this function for the program as a whole, leaving several administrative functions unfulfilled. The office would have the following responsibilities:

  ◦ Coordinate both arms of the program: the grants to cultural organizations and the grants to borough arts councils to select independent teaching artists.

  ◦ Determine training needs for senior center staff, teaching artists, and administrators.

  ◦ Define required capacity for senior-serving organizations and disseminate that information.

  ◦ Standardize and publicize procedures for teaching artists and cultural organizations (timeline, application process, payment, reporting requirements).

(continued)

Infrastructure

- Provide guidance on budgeting and program costs.
- Ensure that all eligible senior centers and other senior-serving organizations understand the value and requirements of SU-CASA and the process for inclusion.
- Serve as the marketing hub.

➢ Encourage participation in a yearly self-evaluation component. DCLA can share individual site evaluations with arts councils and cultural organizations.

"My guitar was buried in the graveyard. [Now] my guitar is out of the grave. The center gave me my life back."

Infrastructure

Selection and matching process

➢ Personnel from the City Council, DFTA, and DCLA should meet twice a year (before and after adoption of the city budget) to determine ways to expedite the selection process.

➢ Pay special attention to the matching process:

- Consult with senior center program directors and evaluate centers based on language, culture, choice of art form, facility, and schedule. Ensure that older adults have a voice.

- Seek teaching artists who speak languages besides English, as well as older artists, in both the recruitment and decision processes.

- Expect teaching artists and cultural organizations to have a planning meeting at the designated senior center and hold a demonstration class for center members.

- Establish a process for reassignment of teaching artists or cultural organizations after the planning meeting if the pairing is not feasible.

➢ Allow senior centers and teaching artists more time to prepare, promote, and run the programs.
A longer start-up period would help teaching artists integrate the program into the center.

Infrastructure

Programming structure and support

➢ Clearly define program structure options that go beyond current proposal and contract specifications. For example, splitting a residency into two distinct, shorter workshop series might make it easier for participants to attend consistently and could expand SU-CASA's impact by attracting different students.

➢ Establish a structure to support senior-serving organizations in learning about the program options and selecting the right one for the situation.

➢ Provide ongoing support to artists and cultural organizations as they design and conduct the programs to promote best practices and establish a point of contact in case of questions or problems.

"Sharing your gifts with others is an opportunity. Make time because it's good."

Equity

The infrastructure recommendations above are fundamental in addressing inequity.

These steps would alleviate identified challenges for all involved with SU-CASA, but they are particularly important for senior centers and cultural organizations that are smaller, that have fewer resources, or that are newer to SU-CASA and creative aging. These steps are also particularly important for teaching artists who have less stable income and those for whom English is not their first language.

In addition to the recommendations above:

➢ Ensure that senior centers and other senior-serving organizations that have not applied for SU-CASA before, or that have not been granted a program, receive information and technical assistance at application time so they can take advantage of the opportunity.

Equity

➤ Develop and provide technical assistance to organizations that lack the necessary capacity (such as through partnering with a more experienced organization, tighter connection with an arts council or cultural organization, or referral to a supporting organization).

➤ Provide additional funding for supplies to allocate to organizations that lack the resources to implement a proposal (for example, centers without a computer or a piano keyboard).

➤ Allow exceptions to the requirement that SU-CASA programs be conducted on the senior center premises when the center has space or resource constraints (for example, permitting a singing class to be held at a nearby church if the center lacks a piano). This would allow centers to forge beneficial partnerships with other organizations.

"I'm alive because I'm doing what I want to do."

Integration into the City Arts Ecosystem

Strengthening creative aging in NYC involves raising the profile of SU-CASA and opening the doors to wider engagement with potential partners.

➢ Market and raise the profile of SU-CASA.

- ◦ Issue a joint DFTA-DCLA press release promoting the information about the art mediums and classes being offered as soon as possible once decided, with a full list of when and where classes will take place. Promote the list on social media to encourage participation. Encourage all City Council members to share the information on their social media and in their newsletters.

- ◦ Institute a searchable system to allow seniors to look for arts classes at centers in their neighborhood on an ongoing basis. (The NYC Parks online [events calendar](#) is an example.)

- ◦ Invite stakeholders to classes and culminating events: participants' family and friends, as well as City Council members, other elected officials, community partners, local businesses, and potential funders.

(continued)

Integration into the City Arts Ecosystem

◦ Have open house events at senior centers to increase visibility in their neighborhoods.

◦ Set aside a small pool of funds for groups to compete for SU-CASA special awards, including the opportunity to perform or exhibit at other locations (or conferences, etc.). When programs are successful, participants would like to show their work beyond their senior centers.

➢ Encourage senior center directors to align SU-CASA programs with their overall programming, such as by incorporating a field trip that is relevant to the program but open to all center members.

Integration into the City Arts Ecosystem

➤ Promote the importance of creative aging in NYC and beyond through an emphasis on partnerships, research, and continued integration with age-friendly practice and policy.

  ◦ Build on the success of the Culture Pass program (allowing individuals with a library card free access to participating arts institutions) by allowing those with a DFTA senior center card to enjoy the same privileges.

  ◦ Build the capacity of the senior services network (not just senior centers) to offer creative aging programs.

  ◦ Recruit more cultural organizations to be champions of creative aging.

  ◦ Recruit academic partners to conduct research and evaluation in collaboration with senior-serving organizations, arts organizations, and older adults.

➤ Promote intergenerational opportunities, including storytelling projects or video collaborations with students.

"We come together, to be accepted, and it is very important. They like my song, I feel good, I feel accepted."

"Keep going, you can do it. I feel like a 15-year-old, I'm 72."

Conclusion

As a city with art in its veins, New York City is a natural to be a leader in creative aging. The large SU-CASA program offers exuberant evidence of this: participants love it and attest to the difference it makes in their lives. But SU-CASA needs a stronger infrastructure to expand and thrive. As creative aging matures as a field of practice, its progress depends on increased visibility and the collaborative efforts of cultural organizations, senior-serving organizations, city agencies, and the arts community at large. Like New York City itself, art draws its vitality from a diverse pool of resources.

"[I come to class] to have a better life, because our life has not finished—a new dimension has started."

Thank you!

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