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All the World's a Stagebridge

Stagebridge founder
Stuart Kandell

Acting out the Wisdom That Comes With Wrinkles | BY WANDA HENNIG

IS THAT FRED ASTAIRE AND GINGER ROGERS TRIPPING THE LIGHT FANTASTIC? Not quite, but there are parallels. Some of the men and women singing, dancing, telling stories and winning enthusiastic applause are of an age to have fond memories of the Hollywood duo. But our stars are right here, right now: members of Oakland's Stagebridge. "It's the nation's oldest and largest operating senior theater company," says founder and director Stuart Kandell, 59.

During the past 12 months, Stagebridge—an arts organization that uses theater and

storytelling to bridge the generation gap and stimulate positive attitudes toward aging—put on more than 500 performances and workshops. Their intergenerational programs include storytelling and acting classes for seniors; stage shows presented to retirement communities, senior centers, convalescent hospitals and the general public; storytelling teaching programs in elementary schools; nurses training programs with a focus on seniors; and writing contests for children.

"It was easy to retire [12 years ago]. I knew it was time," says former Oakland

High School principal Joanne Grimm, 74. "The hard part was not being part of the activities and energy of the students."

In the United States, she points out, "we tend to identify people by what they get paid to do, so when you retire there is a perception that you don't have any worth. To go from someone relatively important, to essentially being invisible, was difficult. You might, at 74, feel the same person you did at 34, but when you get older, people categorize you by the color of your hair and the slowness of your walk." ▶▶



Stagebridgers
Elizabeth Callender
and Audrey Goodfriend

▶▶ Stagebridge

After she retired, Grimm began volunteering at a library program for children. Then, about eight years ago, wanting to do something that would involve her body, she enrolled in a storytelling class at Stagebridge. It turned out she was an acting force to be reckoned with. Since then, she has done musical revues, stand-up comedy and storytelling and has been the star in plays. She found her niche and a support system. "It's like being part of a family," she says.

Stagebridge grew from an acting class Kandell ran at a senior center almost 30 years ago. "Stagebridge gives a forum for the wisdom that comes with wrinkles. If we look at the aging process as one of decline, we'll shoot ourselves in the head. What we want is lives with meaning. Not just adding more years to life, but adding more life to years. That's what happens here.

"The average age of our 150 actors, storytellers, students and volunteers is 70. Many have never previously been on stage. Or perhaps they remember they had fun in a high school play years ago."

The applause, says Kandell, is powerful. "And not just the literal applause. It's also the realization that they're not too old to give to other people and make them happy."

MORE INFO

Stagebridge performs at Arts First Oakland at the First Congregational Church, 2501 Harrison St., (510) 444-4755, www.stagebridge.org. Check the Web site for classes and the annual March "Grandparent Tales" family program.