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Stagebridge, Oakland, CA (photo: Jeannie Hayes)

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CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR OLDER ADULTS TO GIVE BACK

By Stuart Kandell, Founder and Director, Stagebridge, Oakland, CA

When Joanne Grimm was ready to retire at age 64, she wanted to find a new audience. She had been a teacher and high school principal for many years. At first she volunteered with Head Start. But when she encountered children who didn't speak English, she realized she needed to hone her acting skills. She decided to join Stagebridge™, an Oakland-based theatre dedicated to older adults, after seeing an ad for a storytelling class.

That was 16 years ago. Since then, Joanne has studied storytelling, acting, singing, and improv. She was among the first graduates of Stagebridge's Performing Arts Training Certification Program—a program that prepares older adults to teach and direct. Now, at age 80, she is instrumental in many of Stagebridge's community programs. Joanne mentors children in local schools through the Storybridge™ Program; she performs and leads storytelling workshops for seniors in nursing homes through Seniors Reaching Out; and helps student nurses develop greater respect for older patients by telling personal stories in the See Me! Program. This work has sustained her through tough times and enabled her to give back. "Stagebridge was there when my husband was dying and when my son was shot. Some people turn to the church, or to drugs, but I have Stagebridge. I have this opportunity to go outside myself and do something for other people."

Joanne is one of more than 200 adults (ages 55-97) who attend some of the 30 performing arts classes every week at Stagebridge. She leads two of the many "troupe" who reach out to the community. Every year the company gives hundreds of workshops and performances for 25,000 people in schools, senior facilities, community centers and theatres. Founded in 1978, Stagebridge is the nation's oldest and most acclaimed senior theatre, with a mission to "transform the lives of older adults and their communities through the performing arts." Stagebridge gives older adults with little or no experience the opportunity to fulfill lifelong dreams—not only as students and participants in the arts, but also as mentors, performers, teachers, and directors.

The "Age Wave" is upon us: 10,000 people turn 65 every day. Like Joanne, many of them are looking for new challenges, meaningful activities, opportunities to learn, and new audiences with whom to share their talents. Psychologist Erik Erikson called the latter stage of life one of "generativity." As adults age, many feel a growing need to give back. Community arts education providers have an opportunity to meet the needs of older adults, while also finding new and better ways to connect with—and strengthen connections among—all community members. Children and young adults need mentoring and role models. Older adults benefit from inspiration, new challenges, and social connection. By creating opportunities for older adults to participate in the arts and to share their talents and expertise with their communities, it's a win-win for all.

STORYBRIDGE: A MODEL FOR INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING

Stagebridge's Storybridge Listening and Speaking Program is an exemplary model of how to provide older adults with opportunities to engage with, and give back to, their communities through the arts. Storybridge builds on the art of communicating through storytelling and the powerful bonds generated when grandparents share their stories. Since 1993, Storybridge has been bringing elders trained in storytelling to classrooms throughout the San Francisco Bay Area. By sharing personal stories that touch on universal themes, this literacy program helps students from under-resourced neighborhoods develop listening and language skills and build self-confidence. It also gives children and the older adult participants a chance to experience empowering intergenerational relationships.

"Our children feel the richness that comes across the 'bridge' of generations ... the presence of the grandpa and grandma storytellers does far more than our words."

— 5th grade teacher

Storytelling by elders is a time honored way of imparting cultural values from one generation to the next. Earlier generations gathered around fires to hear the elders' stories. Those fires are still waiting to be lit for many of today's youth who often are living far away from their grandparents or apart from older adults in their communities. At the same time, many public schools are searching for programs that help develop literacy and comprehension skills, promote cooperation and social learning, and create stronger family and community bonds.

THE PROGRAM

That's where Storybridge comes in. Storybridge kicks-off at each school in September with an assembly performance by senior storytellers who share personal and traditional stories aligned with a language arts theme. The assembly models storytelling and performance for students and allows the students and the older adult storytellers to connect for the first time. Grandparents and elders from the school community also are invited.

The assembly is followed by a six-week storytelling mentorship in which trained senior storytellers work in each of the participating classrooms one hour a week. They model storytelling by telling personal and traditional tales and talking with students. Following each story, the storyteller discusses the story with the children,

invites their intellectual and emotional responses, and elicits memories and stories from them. This residency develops personal relationships between young and old and motivates students to tell their own stories. It also supports national and state reading/language arts content standards that address the ability to give oral responses discussing factual details, setting, character motivation, and fiction versus non-fiction. The opportunity to practice these skills based on a story they have heard, rather than read, is especially important for students with learning disabilities and English Language Learners. Students can then transfer these skills to improve their oral comprehension skills.

“All the time you spent with us was like a family tradition.”

– 5th grade student

Students next get to tell their own stories. For the next 18 weeks following the storytelling mentorship, professional storyteller/teachers spend an hour in each classroom on storytelling workshops. Their curriculum is based on the National Arts Education Standards, California Standards for Visual & Performing Arts, and California English/Reading & Language Arts. Students learn the principles and techniques of telling traditional and personal stories that are tied directly to the state curriculums. Students then apply these skills to specific kinds of storytelling, which are first demonstrated by the artist and then practiced by the students. Students begin by learning to tell traditional stories and eventually are trained in the skills of gathering oral history, transforming it into stories, and presenting these for public audiences.

The storytelling artist instructs students in methods of interviewing their grandparents or other older family members. “Some telephoned long distance to hear family legacies and others made it a family project. The stories students discovered [and] the understandings they developed [were] extraordinary,” noted one participating fourth grade teacher. Students then share their family stories with each other and select one to work on. The story is then rehearsed in class and finally presented for family and community audiences. Throughout this process, students learn specific English/Language Arts skills of structure and sequencing of a story, finding and effectively using environmental details, character development, and using performance techniques to share the story orally. Students make significant strides in organization, delivery of oral communication, and listening skills.

These residency workshops culminate in a storytelling performance for students, staff, parents and grandparents. The performance is videotaped and a book of stories collected. Selected students are also chosen from each classroom and invited to tell their stories on local radio, cable TV, and in public performances.

RECRUITMENT, TRAINING, AND COORDINATION

Recruiting and training a dedicated resource pool of senior storytellers/grandparent mentors are vital to the program’s success. Stagebridge connects with large senior centers and retirement homes in the vicinity of each school to recruit older adults. Recruiting workshops are then held at these centers to interest and train older adult volunteers. Stagebridge also works with national volunteer organizations that have local chapters: Experience Corps (which trains older adults and pays them to work in local schools) and RSVP (senior volunteer program) to recruit school storytellers. Because older adults want to know what they will gain and how their skills will be put to use in the community, Stagebridge incorporates messages into recruitment materials like, “Make new friends” and “Share your stories with children.” They are also clear about the time commitment expected.

Once storytellers are recruited, they undergo six months of extensive training with Stagebridge before they can participate in the program. They take one or more semesters of storytelling, followed by five sessions of classroom management and language arts curriculum training. Stagebridge staff observe the storytellers throughout their school residencies and provide ongoing feedback.

“As I got out into the classrooms I realized that storytelling wasn’t just a trivial pastime, but an opportunity to influence a child’s thinking and open new worlds.”

– Stagebridge senior storyteller

Additionally, storytellers and participating teachers engage in three professional development days that help define their roles and responsibilities and establish mutual goals. A 100-page curriculum guide with links to Common Core goals helps to guide the training as well. By offering professional development, participating teachers not only gain a better understanding of the principles and techniques of storytelling and develop skills they can implement in their curriculum, but also learn how to collaborate with grandparent volunteers in their classrooms.

For each school partnership, a formal contract is signed with the principal detailing responsibilities, including the assignment of a school liaison (usually a teacher or parent) to work with the Stagebridge schools coordinator. The company’s Storytelling program director is responsible for the training and oversight.

It’s often easy when we are understaffed to just think about ourselves, our programs, and our needs—and not take into full account the needs of the community partner, the teaching artists, and especially the older adults who will deliver the program.

(Continued)

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Here are some tips for meeting the needs of older adults while engaging them as leaders and mentors in your community programs:

- Provide food during training sessions, car-pool to the school site, and have them team-teach with supervision to help them feel more comfortable.
- Listen and observe. Many older adults, especially women, don't feel seen or heard by others. Throughout the program, be sure to give older adult participants ample opportunities to express themselves and provide input, both in group meetings or in writing.
- Be honest and don't patronize.
- Say thank you. Write personal notes to the participants; provide letters from school children; or have the head of the community organization speak to the seniors about the impact of their work.
- Celebrate and show off. Share the final "show" with others: invite other classes, families, nearby community groups or schools. Document the project and share it in community and school newsletters, bulletin boards, photo displays, etc.

IMPACT

"The rewards and benefits from this kind of exchange go both ways. As an elder, I get to tell a little bit of my life story (to a captive audience), and as students, they learn to be comfortable talking with elders and asking questions, and of course listening to the wisdom. And sometimes a seed is planted that may have an impact on their lives."

– Stagebridge senior storyteller

Through the U.S. Department of Education's Arts in Education Model Development and Dissemination Grants Program, Storybridge was funded, over a period of seven years, to design, implement, and evaluate the Storybridge program. During the grant period, evaluation was a key component of the program, accounting for 20% of the budget. Rigorous formal evaluation found the program successful in increasing students' test scores in language arts and reading, improving self-confidence in public speaking, dramatic presentation skills, intergenerational bonding, and awareness of their heritage.

The impact on the older adult storytellers has been just as powerful. Here are some of the things that Storybridge elders have said about their experience:

"Seeing my story re-enacted with fourth grader wonder and enthusiasm awakened my inner child, slumbering for these many years."

"My experience with the children gave me the opportunity to take a look back at some of the defining moments of my life that I really hadn't given much thought to. I continue to contemplate the questions they asked and to consider how some of those more dramatic events have contributed to who I am today."

"The students' incisive questions made me recall incidents, events, and people I hadn't thought about in ages. Quite a stroll down memory lane!"

"Clearly I made new friends who are from the fourth grade in the city where I currently live."

"I loved the kids and how attentive they were. They made me feel important as they really listened to everything I said."

Tapping into the potential of older adults as program leaders, performers, and volunteers provides them opportunities to connect and give back to their community, helps the community gain from the wisdom and stories of its elders, and helps arts education organizations strengthen their relationships with neighborhoods and community partners. Success means "win-win-win." Everyone's needs are met.

RESOURCES

Creativity Matters: the Arts and Aging Toolkit
www.artsandaging.org

NCCA Online Artist Training in Arts and Aging
bit.ly/1kN4gg1

Stagebridge
www.stagebridge.org

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stuart Kandell, Ph.D. is a pioneer of the creative aging movement. He is the founder and longtime director of Stagebridge and a founding board member of the National Center for Creative Aging. He was recently honored by the National Guild with the Milestone Certificate of Appreciation. He may be reached at founder@stagebridge.org.