



BRINGING THE BURNING ISSUE OF GLOBAL DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE TO EUROPE'S STAGES

CREATIVE RESEARCH
A DOCUMENTARY BY
THE EUROPEAN THEATRE CONVENTION

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POWER OF APPLAUSE

Creating theatre with and for elderly people. Experiences and tips. A declaration for spirited intergenerational communication.

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RESOURCES:

Creativity Matters: the Arts and Aging Toolkit
<http://www.nationalguild.org/Programs/Information-Resources---Publications/Publications/Creativity-Matters--Arts---Aging-Toolkit.aspx>

NCCA ONLINE ARTIST TRAINING IN ARTS AND AGING

<http://creativeaging.org/programs-people/ncca-online-artist-training-arts-and-aging>

STAGEBRIDGE

www.stagebridge.org

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 to read to low income children. But when she encountered children who didn't speak English, she realized she had to hone her acting skills. Seeing an advertisement in the paper for a storytelling class at Stagebridge™, a theatre dedicated to older adults near San Francisco, California, she decided to join.

That was 16 years ago. Since then, Joanne has studied storytelling, acting, singing, and improvisation. She was among the first graduates of the Stagebridge's Performing Arts Training Certification Program, enabling her to teach and direct. Now, at age 80, she is instrumental in many of Stagebridge's outreach programs. Joanne mentors children in local schools. She performs and leads storytelling workshops for seniors in nursing homes. And she helps student nurses develop greater respect for older patients by telling personal stories to them as part of their nursing training. This involvement 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. I could come to class, come to a performance and there were people there. 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 250 adults (ages 55-97) who attend some of the 30 performing arts classes every week at Stagebridge. She leads two of the many "troupes" 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. Since 1978, Stagebridge has been the United States' oldest and most acclaimed senior theatre whose mission is 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 in their community.

This article addresses the need for community involvement with older adults as an integral part of community arts education; how two model outreach programs work; and concludes with some suggestions for successful outreach programs.

The time is ripe to open the floodgates to more older adults. As community arts schools and theatres, we all must strengthen our position in the local community, provide for the needs of our constituents and students, and serve some of the many needs of our neighbors. In the U.S. we have seen a dramatic increase in older adult (55+) participation. At Stagebridge our training program enrollment has doubled in the past five years. The "Age Wave" is upon us with 10,000 people turning 65 every day, many of whom are looking for new challenges, meaningful activities, opportunities to learn, and new audiences to share their talents with.

There is a growing need, as Joanne says "to give back," or as psychologist Erik Erikson called this stage of life one of "generativity." Children need mentoring. Young adults need role models. Older adults need inspiration. By bridging the arts institutions and community, we serve everyone's needs and it is truly a "win-win-win" for all.

PROGRAMS THAT WORK

STORYBRIDGE SCHOOLS PROGRAM

Today, grandparents are often isolated from children, causing a separation of ancient partners. 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. Furthermore, many schools are desperate for programs that help reduce violence and create stronger family and community bonds. Storybridge brings elder storytellers and professional older adult teaching artists into classrooms to mentor at-risk elementary school children through storytelling, oral history and performance. Continuously evaluated and refined, Storybridge has grown significantly since 1993 into a nationally admired model for intergenerational learning.

Storybridge consists of a 24-week residency in classrooms, starting with six weeks of storytelling visits by "grandparent mentors." This is followed by an 18 week residency conducted by professional older adult teaching artists. Children learn the skills of storytelling;

study and practice interviewing with the grandparent mentors; interview their own grandparents; write and learn their stories. The program culminates with an all school assembly for peers, family and community. Finally, selected students perform their stories for public performances on cable-TV, local radio and at local book stores.

Training is a vital part of the program's success. Stagebridge storytellers must have taken at least one or more semesters of storytelling, followed by five sessions of classroom management and language arts curriculum training. Teaching artists and participating teachers engage in three professional development days that encourage and define their responsibilities. A 100 page curriculum guide with links to common core goals helps steer the project.

Stagebridge raises the majority of funding for the project, usually a mix of government, foundations, and corporations. Schools contribute what they can, which has gotten to be less and less over the past decade. 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.

Joanne recalls "I had this child whom everybody said was really bad news. But, he wanted to tell a story at the assembly. Against all the advice, I put him in. He waited his turn and he told this story with great delight and it was absolutely amazing. Afterwards the adults said they didn't know he could do that."

Evaluation was a key component (20% of the budget) for the seven years that Stagebridge had Federal funds from the Department of Education. This 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. Teachers report their teaching in all subjects improves when they learn to create a good story. As one 10 year old said, "The time you spent with us was like a family tradition."

SENIORS REACHING OUT

These programs annually provide workshops and performances for nearly 6,000 older adults in residential facilities, adult day and senior centers.

Story Circles for well elders: Stagebridge helps elderly low-income residents reduce their social isolation. Partnering with Satellite Affordable Housing, a large government sponsored housing developer, Stagebridge uses storytelling circles to draw elderly residents out of their self-isolation and encourage social interaction and new friendships among neighbors. "Stagebridge has been transformative" says Director of Resident Services "We're seeing tangible positive results."

TimeSlips™ for elders with dementia: Stagebridge is the only training center in the Western U.S. for the TimeSlips creative storytelling method for people with dementia. By involving Alzheimer's patients in a creative activity, the site staff and client families see them in a new, more positive light. Staff uses this successful technique to train activity directors, health aides and residential staff. The program director of an adult day center where Stagebridge has worked for five years says "The experience gives them a new outlet, opportunity to verbalize, and a positive demeanor." To date, Stagebridge has trained 140 staff from 25 facilities statewide.

Music and Stories for elders in rehab centers: For the past five years, Stagebridge has partnered with a nearby rehab center to provide twice/month live music with audience participation. Joanne recalls a recent visit: "This afternoon, as I always do, I walked among the audience at Medical Hill stopping to speak to each one. A resident swaddled in heavy blankets and wearing a ski cap grabbed my hand. 'Thank you for coming. We never get out of here. You bring the outside to us.' Through our stories, we bring the world to those whose universe has shrunk to four walls and whose time is measured by their medication schedule."

Stagebridge supports these programs through partnerships where the facility pays what it can and the company raises support from local government and foundations. Formal agreements are signed detailing responsibilities, and the company's Booking Director works with the staff liaison at each facility. Stagebridge students and professional teaching staff receive training specific to the art discipline and type of facility. For example, the Storytelling Director will teach facilitation skills and storytelling appropriate for different senior populations/venues. Storytellers then "shadow" professional teaching artists for 3-5 sessions and then work in pairs team-teaching.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, tapping into the potential of older adults as students, volunteers, and program leaders with community groups provides them with new audiences and helps you strengthen your organization's ties in the community. As Joanne says, "Maybe one person has enjoyed themselves or laughed or remembered something. That's what I'm there for."

TIPS FOR OUTREACH ACTIVITIES WITH OLDER ADULTS

RECRUIT WITH A "CARROT"

"Make new friends." "Learn new skills." "Share stories with children." "Brighten the lives of elders in nursing homes." "Limited time commitment." Older adults want to know how their skills will be put to use in the community.

PLAN CAREFULLY

It's very easy when we are understaffed to just think about ourselves, our programs, 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. Success means "win-win-win." Everyone's needs are met. Provide older adults with some food for a late afternoon session, car-pool to the site, or have them team-teach with supervision and feedback.

BE CLEAR

Craft simple contracts and letters of understanding that detail each other's responsibilities, roles and deliverables. Ask that a liaison be selected and detail what their responsibility is.

THEIR VOICE MATTERS

Many older adults, especially women, don't feel that they are seen or heard by others. Throughout the process, give them opportunities to express themselves in group meetings and in writing. Periodically monitor programs with all parties involved.

BE HONEST AND DON'T PATRONIZE

We all want to feel respected and older adults can tell when they're being treated with condescension or honesty.

SHOW OFF

Share the final "show" with others: invite other classes, families, nearby community groups or schools. Document the project and share it. And ask the facility, if it has a marketing or community outreach to share your work with others on bulletin boards, in newsletters, photo displays, etc.

SAY THANK YOU

Write personal notes to the participants; provide letters from school children; or have the head of the community organization speak.