

Arts Education for Older Adults at the Brooklyn Public Library

[Brooklyn Public Library](#)

Intergenerational

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Apr 22, 2016

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Byline

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Editor's note: This Program Model is part of a series highlighting the work of the [Lifetime Arts Affiliates](#), a cohort of 20 libraries that has been working with Lifetime Arts Inc. to launch professionally conducted arts education for older adults. For more information, check out [Lifetime Arts' Creative Aging Toolkit for Public](#)

Libraries, a free online resource for librarians that provides information about creative aging research, best practices, and practical advice for planning and implementing creative aging programs.

BPL first introduced creative aging programs to older adult patrons in fall 2012 as a partner in the "[Creative Aging Public Libraries Project](#)," a signature program of Lifetime Arts Inc. Since its launch, Creative Aging has become a core program among BPL's services for older adults, providing much needed structured opportunities to learn, create and socialize.

Over the past three years, BPL has offered 51 creative aging cycles and served 870 seniors. **(View photos of the series from the Photo Slideshow at right.)** In each series, students learn the basic elements of an art form (such as Chinese brush painting and pottery), complete short artistic exercises and work on long-term projects. Classes are designed for students with little or no experience in the art form, but they're equally relevant to students at advanced levels. Each series usually lasts 8 to 12 sessions, with each session lasting at least 90 minutes. Every program ends with a culminating event in which participants showcase their work to family, friends and neighbors.

Advanced Planning

BPL's creative aging program reflects a wide range of artistic disciplines, such as watercolor, collage, poetry and singing. These disciplines are selected by each participating library branch based on community input. At the beginning of the project period, BPL sent an email to the library's 60 branches introducing creative aging and extending an invitation for patrons to complete surveys. Branch selection was based on the interest and commitment from library staff in providing professionally taught creative aging programs. The selection of workshops at each branch was based on patron interest in specific visual and performing arts, literary and crafts disciplines.

Enrollment is on a first-come, first-served basis, and interested participants have to register. We also offer waiting lists. During the first few weeks, several teaching artists decided to open their classes to more people, and in those instances,

individuals on waiting lists were invited to attend. Each program has an average of 15 to 30 students.

Teaching artists, who lead the workshops and are responsible for preparing and teaching a detailed multi-week curriculum, were identified using the [Lifetime Arts Creative Aging roster](#) and through BPL's network of vetted arts professionals.

Programs are planned in spring, summer and fall cohorts, as funding allows. Under the direction of BPL's Outreach Services, the Services for Older Adults Department manages and oversees all aspects of the creative aging programs, from selecting branches and securing teaching artists to measuring participant outcomes. Outreach Services staff, including Principal Administrative Assistant Luz Acevedo and myself, work closely with participating branches to ensure each program series is a success. We regularly visit classes to assess the quality of instruction and materials, as well as the engagement of participants.

As part of the [Public Libraries Initiative](#), BPL aligns with Lifetime Arts' vision for mobilizing the trusted, neutral, information-rich public space of the library to deliver arts education. There are three goals of BPL's Creative Aging programs:

- Engage older adults in opportunities that teach arts-based skills, foster social connections and provide outlets for sharing works in a public setting
- Provide artist-led programs in a variety of disciplines at various BPL locations
- Promote lifelong learning, ignite creativity and introduce older adults to other free library resources

Marketing

Programs are promoted through word of mouth and posts on BPL's website and event calendar. We also distribute fliers to each of the branches and around the community.

Budgeting

Each creative aging series cost approximately \$3,390:

- BPL full-time personnel: \$0
- BPL part-time personnel: \$9 an hour (This is optional. You could utilize senior volunteers instead.)
- Teaching artists' stipends: approximately \$2,500 per cycle
- Art supplies and refreshments for the culminating event: \$500 per cycle

Day-of-event Activity

Creative aging classes are led by a teaching artist, hosted by a branch staff member and supported by a volunteer or part-time senior assistant. Senior assistants are older adults responsible for setting up meeting spaces, managing distribution of supplies and helping their peers with projects. During sessions, senior assistants or branch staff members take attendance and speak with participants about their experience.

Program Execution

This past year, 197 older adults were served through the BPL's 12 programs. These programs included movement classes at Bay Ridge Library, painting at Carroll Gardens, memoir writing at DeKalb and Mill Basin libraries, two choral singing programs at Dyker Library, oral history at Highlawn Library, drawing at Macon Library, watercolor at Midwood Library, two Chinese brush painting programs at New Utrecht Library and pottery at Saratoga Square Senior Center. There is currently a poetry and collage program underway at Flatbush Library and a multidisciplinary arts program at Sheepshead Bay that both run through mid-July.

At the end of each program series, participants display their work at public exhibitions and performances at the host library branch. Last year, 11 culminating events were held and attended by 365 family and community members, as well as library staff.

The primary outcome of creative aging programs is for seniors to enjoy what they're learning and the social environment the class provides. Program success is measured with pre- and post-surveys, attendance and qualitative feedback. During the first and final sessions of each series, the teaching artist administers a survey

asking participants questions about their behaviors, knowledge, artistic skills and experiences. This information is shared with the Services for Older Adults Department and used to plan future creative aging and other library programs.

Participant feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. Here is a sample of survey comments:

- "Wonderful class. Far exceeded my expectation. Teacher — one of the best I have ever had — very knowledgeable and gives very good individual directions. Supplies and materials well planned for work."
- "It is wonderful that you make programs like this available to seniors for no charge. Supplying the materials makes it possible for people to attend who might not be able to afford to purchase supplies."
- "Thrilled that New Utrecht has programs for seniors. It keeps me alert. I love to learn and use the part of my brain that I hardly use. Engaging with others and making friends is vital to a healthy lifestyle, and I am always ready to sign up for all programs."

Students often travel outside of their neighborhoods to participate in classes, and instructors occasionally volunteer their time to lead additional sessions. BPL is eager to expand creative aging to serve additional communities, especially those that are under-resourced, economically disadvantaged and multilingual.

Advice

When planning to host a creative aging workshop, consider the long-term impacts for your older-adult audience. I found that each program attracts participants who may use the library as a "third space" to meet, socialize and practice their newfound craft, even when no formal creative aging programs are in session.

At Dyker Library, participants in the choral creative aging program organized into a regular singing group that continues to meet even though the formal creative aging program is over. They have performed on stage at the New York Theatre Workshop and sang "The Star-Spangled Banner" at the Coney Island Cyclones opening baseball game. Participants of the writing program at Kings Highway still meet regularly at the branch and have created their own social group.

Supporting Materials

[Download this Program as a PDF](#)

- Feedback (Coming Soon!)
- [Programming Librarian Facebook Group](#)

Slideshow Images



Image



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