

Arts colonies

offer a creative,
whole-person wellness
alternative for
independent living



Collaboration between Meta Housing and EngAGE fuels the development of arts-focused communities

by Marilyn Larkin, MA

The benefits gained by involvement in the arts, particularly for older adults, cannot be underestimated. The late Gene Cohen, MD, PhD, a pioneering geriatric psychiatrist, and colleagues demonstrated the impact of cultural programs participation on the physical, mental and social health and functioning of older adults in a landmark study initiated in 2001.¹ An entire literature supporting such interventions has since emerged (see the sidebar “Selected studies of arts programming for older adults” on page 43).

Cohen’s team found that, compared with those who did not receive the intervention, individuals who participated in a chorale program for one year reported “a higher overall rating of physical health, fewer doctor visits, less medication use, fewer instances of falls, and fewer other health problems than the comparison group.”¹ The intervention group members also showed higher morale and less loneliness than the comparison group, as well as increased activity. Taken together, the findings demonstrated “a reduction of risk factors driving the need for long-term care,” according to the study authors.

Inspired in part by Cohen’s research, California-based visionaries Tim Carpenter

Continued on page 38

*In 2012, Meta Housing
opened its North Hollywood
arts colony in the city's NoHo
Arts District*



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Continued from page 36



In each arts colony community, Meta Housing offers a variety of arts-focused, interactive classes that are taught by professional-level instructors

and John Huskey have created a model of senior housing focused on arts amenities and programs. The Burbank Senior Artists Colony, completed in 2005, was the first arts community to result from this collaboration between Carpenter, founder and executive director of EngAGE, a nonprofit organization and residence services provider that takes a whole-person approach to active, healthy aging, and Huskey, chairman and CEO of Meta Housing Corporation, a senior housing developer headquartered in Los Angeles.

When Carpenter and Huskey met in the mid-1990s, “we both wanted to do something new and different and try to change things,” Carpenter recalls. “We looked at what was provided inside independent senior housing and saw that not a lot was going on. We wanted to create communities in which people could live better lives.”

Kasey Burke, president of Meta Housing, adds that when the company did

market studies, it found “very low engagement in senior communities—just a lot of people living in their apartments by themselves, often developing drug and alcohol problems. There was a general feeling of sadness and malaise,” Burke comments. “We wondered what we could do as senior housing developers to change this.”

Seeking a model of a more active, engaged community, Carpenter thought of college. “People often enter senior housing when they retire or lose someone, and when they get there, it’s a strange environment and they don’t know how to navigate it,” he says. “I thought, Wouldn’t it be cool if there were someone like me to greet them, hand them their college courses, and say, ‘Follow me—this is what the rest of your life will look like?’”

That train of thought led to the arts as a theme for such a community. In addition to being familiar with the research showing benefits, Carpenter had grown

up near Yaddo, an arts colony in Saratoga Springs, New York, that spawned many famous artists. “Yaddo was such a great environment,” Carpenter shares. “People would go for months at a time to work on a project, and being around like-minded people elevated their work and their feeling about what they were doing, so they would go home energized.” He pondered a senior housing community where art, rather than age, was the glue that held residents together. A community where “people went next door to get script notes from a neighbor, rather than to borrow a cup of sugar.”

Getting started

The vision established, Carpenter and Huskey embarked on the journey that led to the development of the Burbank Senior Artists Colony. “We thought if we said it’s about art, people would have to come willing to play,” Carpenter says. “There would be an inherent promise that when people moved in, they would

Continued on page 40

Arts colonies offer a creative, whole-person wellness alternative for independent living

Continued from page 38



Meta Housing's Long Beach Senior Arts Colony offers more than 15,000 sq. ft. of community space, including this bright lounge with art on the walls and a piano

From a process standpoint, Burke continues, "the only thing we did differently for Burbank compared with our previous affordable housing communities is that, in addition to working with our architects, we put together an advisory council to make sure we built the space appropriately." The advisory council consisted of people from the surrounding community, those who worked for the city, a representative from Meta Housing's property management company, and Carpenter.

"Working with the council helped us learn what potential residents wanted, so we could design the features from the beginning," Burke shares. The Burbank development "ended up including a lot more community space than many affordable senior communities normally have," he adds, "with very specific types of spaces for the art classes." In addition to a theater, creative arts studios and art display galleries, the design provided a library, fitness center, resource center, game room, business center and outdoor courtyards,² as well as other amenities. The final step, as for all developments, was to gain approvals from the planning commission and neighborhood and city councils.

Altogether, it took close to five years from idea to completion, notes Chris Maffris, Meta Housing's senior vice president. The Burbank Senior Artists Colony has 141 rental units that house about 200 people, some of whom are retired, while others are still working full- or part-time. Some units are income-restricted affordable housing. The average age of residents is currently 72, because many moved in when they were in their 60s and stayed. Meta Housing anticipates that in five years, the average age will be about 77, since residents tend not to move out unless they need a higher level of care.

Location-specific offerings

Since the opening of the Burbank Senior Artists Colony, Meta Housing and EngAGE have collaborated on several other

be activated by art, which in turn would spur engagement and positive behavior change, resulting in their living longer, more independent and happier lives."

From the development side, the Burbank community, "like any community, started with an idea, and then we had to find the piece of land, secure financing, get the property and title, and work with the local cities and agencies," reveals Burke. Financing came mainly from foundations, federal and state tax credits, and local agencies.

How did Meta Housing convince investors and lenders to support the arts colony model? "They already knew our reputation as a high-quality senior housing developer and our ability to deliver on promises," Burke comments. "We told them we were going to ramp up our services and implement a quality of life through activity and creativity that far exceeded anything we'd done before." That was enough, he adds, for everyone to buy into the new concept.

Resources

Internet

Meta Housing Corporation

<http://metahousing.com>

EngAGE

www.engagedaging.org

Print

Cohen, G. D., Perlstein, S., Chapline, J., et al. (2006). The Impact of Professionally Conducted Cultural Programs on the Physical Health, Mental Health, and Social Functioning of Older Adults. *The Gerontologist*, 46(6), 726-734.*

* The full study is available for no charge at <http://gerontologist.oxfordjournals.org/content/46/6/726.full.pdf+html>

senior arts communities, with more in development. Amenities and programming depend on the location, according to Maffris. For the 126-unit rentals in the NoHo (North Hollywood) Senior Arts Colony, Meta Housing partnered with a local professional company, Road Theatre Company, which puts on a series of professional plays and musicals in the senior community's 78-seat theater. NoHo residents participate in those performances as stagehands and, occasionally, actors; in the off-season, they produce and perform their own shows. All productions are open to the local community.

The Long Beach Senior Arts Colony, a 161-unit multifamily community for people ages 55-plus, was designed specifically with a view toward "connecting with the community-at-large as well as other arts communities," Maffris explains. It features a 99-seat theatre, arts and dance studios, and a large space for gallery showings that is used by residents as well as artists from the surrounding community. In addition to its arts-focused amenities, the community features a computer room, game room, dog park, community gardens, outdoors spa, fitness room and a yoga/meditation room.

Glendale Arts Colony, which is under construction, will be a 70-unit affordable housing development for families in Los Angeles County. At the heart of the development is a "full-scale, professional-level art gallery space for exhibits, performances and other creative programming," says Maffris. The five-story apartment community will also include a sculpture garden, a digital media lab, and a series of outdoor artist work decks. "We're doing all we can to help residents connect, collaborate and create with each other and the larger community," he comments.

EngAGE's Carpenter notes that, in keeping with his "college" vision, the

organization hires professional-level teachers to teach on-site courses for free in all the arts colony communities. Courses change every 6-to-12 weeks, he notes, plus each semester "ends with culminating events in which participants use their skills in real-world ways. If residents participate in a painting class, then they will be part of an art show. On the fitness side, we run an annual Senior Olympics event in which people compete, and this motivates them to stay involved and exercise all year long." To promote lifelong learning, classes to enhance computer skills and learn new languages are among the offerings. EngAGE is also exploring the culinary arts, including classes on healthy gardening. Underlying all programming is a single driving force, Carpenter stresses: "Engagement."

Seniors centers and other local organizations may offer similar programming, Carpenter acknowledges, and so whenever possible, the arts colonies try not to duplicate what is already being provided. "Whenever we come into a community, we assess the lay of the land, figure out who is doing what and try to collaborate with them," he reveals. "Our big mission is to change the way people perceive aging, and everyone can contribute to that." Further, seniors centers generally cater to a self-selected population of people who are already willing to travel to do something, Carpenter adds. "We're trying to make it as easy as possible for people to participate by eliminating the need for and the cost of transportation. In our communities, people can simply walk downstairs or down the block and engage in experiences that can change their lives. And they don't go back home, outside of the community, afterwards; they're on-site 24/7."

Like Meta Housing's recently opened Pacific Avenue Arts Colony, a 49-unit development in San Pedro that has no

Continued on page 42

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Founding Partners



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Continued from page 41



The NoHo Senior Arts Colony features a 78-seat professional performing arts theater. Meta Housing partnered with the Road Theatre Company to run the venue, with the company's plays and musicals open to the local community

age restrictions, the Glendale Arts Colony will give preference to professional artists, although those who want to participate in an artistic community or see if they can become artists are welcome when there are vacancies. “The policy is more inclusive than it sounds,” Carpenter comments. “Although professional artists are required to submit their work for review as part of the application process, those who are not artists can submit a letter explaining why they want to be part of the community. We try to allow these people to come in whenever possible, because their stories, for me, are the most inspiring.”

Confronting challenges

From an arts colony's programming perspective, “the biggest challenge is how people in the United States perceive aging and the self-stereotyping that results,” Carpenter reveals. “When you hear negative stereotypes of aging enough times, you start to believe them. So our first job is to undo the effects of that.” He acknowledges that's not an easy task, especially in Los Angeles. [Ed. The city's influential entertainment in-

dustry is notoriously ageist. For example, actress Maggie Gyllenhaal, 37, was recently told she is “too old” to play the love interest of a 55-year-old man.^{3]}

“I'm in the heart of darkness here,” Carpenter admits. “But we're doing all we can in designing our programming to improve perceptions of aging and to let people know they are capable of coming downstairs or walking across a courtyard to take a class.”

When Carpenter founded EngAGE in 1999, he was the organization's only employee. “I would knock on doors in a senior community and say, ‘Wouldn't you rather join in a rousing conversation than sit here and watch a soap opera?’” he recalls. “That constant on-site cheer-leading led to results.” While at the time “it seemed like some kind of magic that people could improve their health to the point where they could get out of their chairs and not use walkers or oxygen machines ..., it was simply health,” Carpenter observes. “Now we're extending these benefits through all the wellness dimensions and the results are amazing.”

Great teachers are another reason the arts colony model works, according to Carpenter. “The college-level environment also generates a feeling of energy and excitement,” he says. “We literally create ‘poster children’ by displaying posters of people who have changed their lives by becoming part of these programs, and we create peer groups to sustain their motivation.”

From a developer's perspective, Maffris notes that the biggest challenge is to involve the right partners. “By working with EngAGE, we're helping to ensure that we don't just build something and put up a sign that says it's a senior arts community,” he observes. “We're making sure things are there to make that happen.”

Lessons learned

Many communities offer arts programming for their residents. But there's more to fostering engagement than simply offering classes, Carpenter says. “Of course, part of the success of such programs depends on who you hire to teach and what they're capable of doing themselves and inspiring in others. Beyond that, we've found that constant change is good,” he shares. “The idea of a semester system culminating in a real-life event worked when we were younger and also works when we're older—setting and accomplishing goals feels the same whether you're 21 or 91.”

The semester structure also gives communities an opportunity to continually change both programming and instructors. “Offering the same programs with the same instructors day after day, year after year, is terribly unmotivating,” Carpenter comments. “No one and nothing is that interesting.” Even if a program is “cool” when first offered, “management will kill it with the duration,” he explains. “If someone comes in and wants to teach water aerobics, for example, and ends up teaching it for 18 years on Tuesday afternoon, eventually people don't

want to participate any more.” For arts colony professionals who do teach regularly over a period of years, “we still try to get them to change what they offer,” says Carpenter.

EngAGE also provides train-the-trainer programs to help lifelong-learning instructors understand that older adults may learn differently from other students. “Being a teacher in a senior arts colony or any community for older adults means you have to work and think on your feet,” Carpenter emphasizes. “The first thing I learned is you may stay up the night before creating a lesson plan, and 15 seconds into the class, you’re on your own. I advise people to ‘be in the program you’re in, not the one you planned’—be in the program, motivate people, and get them talking and learning.”

On the developer’s side, “we took everything we learned from Burbank and tried to repeat and bring it up a level in the North Hollywood community,” Burke states. “In addition to making the site an arts colony with plenty of community space and classes for our residents, we built the live theater,” he says. “Similarly, partly because of advances in technology, we added fully equipped editing bays in North Hollywood and in Long Beach, so residents can do film and sound editing; these communities also have gallery spaces, whereas in Burbank, the hallways became the galleries. So we try to enhance everything with each iteration.” With the Glendale Arts Colony, for example, Meta Housing added both a digital media lab and an “idea lab”—a space in which residents can participate in various creative activities.

Looking ahead

Moving forward, Meta Housing is likely to continue building arts colonies for older adults as well as for people who have had careers in the arts or are currently professional artists, according to Maffris. “These developments are very different,” he says. “The senior arts colonies are about active aging and aging well. The professional arts colonies are more of a tool for community development. For example, San Pedro once had a great arts community, but many of the

artists who had driven that scene left, so the professional arts colony was a way of bringing in fresh energy with new artists.”

The other arts colonies on the Meta Housing drawing board will likely follow one of the two models, Maffris continues. The company has also received requests from other cities and developers that are exploring arts colonies as alternatives to traditional affordable senior housing.

“I believe the arts colony concept can work anywhere because there are creative people everywhere, not just in the heart of the entertainment industry,” Maffris says. “But while creativity is part of the model, the crux of it is involvement—people being engaged. As opposed to growing old and feeling isolated and devalued, you can do something as simple as going downstairs because you’re setting up the props for a show. It gives you a job to do if you’re not already working, in a place where you matter and where people care about you.”

Marilynn Larkin, MA, is an award-winning medical writer and editor, an ACE-certified personal trainer and group fitness instructor, and originator of PosturAbility®, a program that boosts posture and self-esteem. She is also ICAA’s Communications Director and a regular contributor to the Journal on Active Aging®.

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2. Burbank Senior Artists Colony website. Community. Retrieved on May 24, 2015, from <http://www.seniorartistscolony.com>.
3. Waxman, S. M. (May 20, 2015). Gyllenhaal on Hollywood Ageism: I Was Told 37 Is “Too Old” for a 55-Year-Old Love Interest. *The Wrap*. Retrieved on May 24, 2015, from <http://www.thewrap.com/maggie-gyllenhaal-on-hollywood-ageism-i-was-told-37-is-too-old-for-a-55-year-old-love-interest>.

Images courtesy of Meta Housing Corporation

Selected studies of arts activities for older adults

Since a landmark study by Dr. Gene Cohen and colleagues showed the benefits of professionally conducted cultural programs to the health and wellness of older adults,¹ other studies and reports have confirmed these findings. Following are selected recent examples:

Assisted Living Federation of America (ALFA) & American Art Therapy Association. (2013, February). Art in Senior Living: Enhancing the Lives of Older Adults. Available at www.arttherapy.org/upload/alfatoolkit.pdf

Castora-Binkley, M., Noelker, L., Prohaska, T., & Satariano, W. (2010). Impact of Arts Participation on Health Outcomes for Older Adults. *Journal of Aging, Humanities, and the Arts*, 4(4), 352–367. Available at www.benrose.org/kpi/Castora-Binkley_2010_Impact_of_arts_participation_on_health.pdf

Cohen, G. D. (2006). Research on Creativity and Aging: The Positive Impact of the Arts on Health and Illness. *Generations*, 30(1), 7–15. Available at <http://www.peopleandstories.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/RESEARCH-ON-CREATIVITY-AND-AGING.pdf>

Moody, E., & Phinney, A. (2012). A Community-Engaged Arts Program for Older People: Fostering Social Inclusion. *Canadian Journal on Aging*, 31(1), 55–64. Available at <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=8499978&fileId=S0714980811000596>

Phinney, A., Moody, E. M., & Small, J. A. (2014). The Effect of a Community-Engaged Arts Program on Older Adults’ Well-being. *Canadian Journal on Aging*, 33(3), 336–345. Available at <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=9336972&fileId=S071498081400018X>