

Art Enriches Lives at Every Age

Helen Sikov, MSW, LNHA

Two recent art and cultural events inspired me to write this article for *Seniors Digest*. The first was an art project called "Still Lives" at the Washington Care Center (WCC), and the second was the World Dance Party at the Southeast Senior Center. These events reminded me that the elders of our community will continue to discover that their lives are healthier and more meaningful when they have opportunities to participate and contribute through artistic expression.

Still Lives



"Still Lives" was the inspiration of artist Susie Lee, a project for which she has received a Genius Award from the *The Stranger*, Seattle's weekly news publication. Over the course of several months, Susie spent time with numerous residents who live at WCC, listening to their stories, hearing what was important and meaningful at this time in their lives, learning what people hold on to and what they let go of as they age.

WCC is a skilled nursing facility in South East Seattle. The population served is from all over the region, and over 50% return to home or some other community setting. But the elders who reside there long term are some of the frailest and medically compromised in the community. Yet they continue to find pleasure in relationships with family, friends, caregivers and church families. They are encouraged to exercise, even if it is just wheelchair yoga, and to interact with those around them.



As people near the twilight of their lives, time takes on a different meaning, as Susie learned. The portraits she created with each individual resident, the props and costumes worn for the portraits, are intended to reveal aspects of aging and time. The community is diverse ethnically and the portraits represent a blend of cultures. Susie shared with me that "over time, aspects such as fragility, fatigue, dignity, restfulness, stubbornness, elegance, confusion, humor, and peacefulness are conveyed, and it is within these ideas that, perhaps, some ideas of honesty and beauty hopefully emerge."

Each portrait is a 30 minute snapshot in time, videotaped without editing. It is not a portrait that one can pass without taking pause—pausing to slow one's pace, and appreciate our shared humanity. The format reminds young visitors of the moving

portraits in *Harry Potter*. Most visitors walk by with curiosity, but the WCC residents will watch the same portrait over and over for hours. The contribution to their community is in front of them, preserved for all time.

World Dance Party

The Southeast Senior Center hosted a World Dance Party on November 6. I love ethnic music, dance, and all ages, so I thought, why not? The event was well attended, and was truly an all-ages intergenerational party.

Whether it was the Central Area Senior Center Sliders, or Fred, our young hip hop instructor, trying to get everyone out on the dance floor, there was little time for me to sit, even to enjoy the multi-cultural potluck! If you didn't come with a partner, there was always someone to dance with. The instructors kept us all moving, dancing to the beats at whatever level of competency, with smiles and laughter abounding. There were dancers from Asian Counseling Services, a salsa instructor, Somali and Eritrean Afro-Moves, as well as some ballroom and disco, allowing for an active social experience.

I observed seniors and elementary school students dancing together, teens who were patient with some of our pathetic attempts to get a hip hop routine down, and very few hanging out on the fringes watching. I had this sense of celebrating life and everyone contributing to each other's well-being through dance and sampling the variety of cuisines.

If you would like to see more wonderful photos of the World Dance Party, visit the [website of photographers Michelle and Jack Storms!](#)



In 2011, Celebrate the Art of Sharing

As the New Year approaches, people like to make resolutions. Is there a place to include contributing to your community in some way? Is there an art form you enjoy that can be a means of doing so, even if in some small way?

I have spent over 25 years in this community working with elders, primarily those who are considered most medically compromised. Elders that seem the happiest are the ones who realize they can continue to give. It could be their stories that teach, or

their words of wisdom to the younger members of the community, or their courage to try a new art form and share their joy in doing so with others.

Desmond Tutu said, "Do your little bit of good where you are; it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world." Happy New Year!

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The World Dance Party was facilitated by [My World Dance](#).

Photos: Top left, Kyle Johnson, The Stranger. World Dance Party photos: Terry Morton, Senior Services