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Young at art: Project will study how participating .In the arts impacts seniors



The old adage about staying young at heart expands to the brain, lungs and muscular system when you add singing, acting and painting to the mix.

"We know anecdotally that art is good for your well-being; now, we're hoping to prove it," said Wendy White, director of development for Larimer Chorale.

The chorale's new senior vocal program, Singing for Seniors, kicks off Tuesday. The pilot program, sponsored by the Quick Foundation and AARP, provides older adults with an opportunity to participate in recreational singing.

The main goal is to have fun, White said. But the initial sixth-month evaluation period also will allow the chorale to begin a research project that will study the group's impact on participants' health.

"Singing is a whole-body experience," said music therapist Megumi Azekawa, who is leading Singing for Seniors.

In addition to lifting one's spirits, singing opens up the lungs, increases oxygen to the brain and improves memory said Azekawa, a neurological music therapist who runs the Loveland -based music therapy program MusiClinic.

And it's not just Singing that impacts health. In 2006, a study by the National Endowment for the Arts and George Washington University found that elderly participants involved in weekly participatory arts programs reported better health, fewer doctor visits and lower medication requirements.

Additionally, another 2006 study by cognitive psychologist Helga Noice and cognitive researcher Tony Noice found that seniors who participated in a four-week acting course showed significantly improved word-recall and problem-solving abilities.

That's not news to Evelin Seay. At 65, Seay said keeping busy is one of her top priorities, and one of her favorite ways to keep busy is participating in the Slightly Older Adult Players (SOAP) Troupe. The senior theater troupe puts on seasonal theatrical productions; Seay just wrapped up directing the troupe's spring show, "The Pie Ladies."

From learning lines to staying organized with schedules to exercising her creative talents on costuming and props, being part of the troupe for the past two years has been "like a shot in the arm," Seay said.

Using the arts to stay active is a lesson Seay learned from her mother, Lucy Apodaca, who passed away last year at 95.

"She sang a one-hour concert for us the day before she died and learned to oil paint in the last year of life," Seay noted of her mother, adding that Apodaca's worst fear was losing her mental acuity to dementia or Alzheimer's, so she was adamant about staying active in her church and in the arts.

"I think the arts really do keep you young," Seay said.

The magic of theater can work at any age, said Bonnie L. Vorenberg, a nationally recognized expert in senior theater. Now living in Oregon, Vorenberg graduated from Colorado State University in 1973 and is the author of "Senior Theatre Connections" and "Enriching an Older Person's Life Through Senior Adult Theatre."

One of the many stereotypes about senior theater is that it's only for those who are very active and already have experience in the performing arts. Senior theater can mean everything from acting on stage to helping with props, and everyone, including the very frail, can participate, Vorenberg said.

In addition to physical well being, the arts have shown to benefit emotional health as well. The 2006 NEA study showed that participants who had access to weekly arts activities had a more positive mental health outlook and also were more social and likely to participate in additional activities.

One of the anticipated benefits to Singing with Seniors is an increased sense of community among participants, Azekawa said. That sense of being part of something often leads to increased self-esteem and increased socialization.

The stage also provides a much-needed fantasy outlet for seniors, as well as an acceptable emotional outlet for sometimes unacceptable emotions, Vorenberg said.

"In the real world, it's not acceptable to be upset or angry, but seniors go through so much and we expect them to deal with so much and not be upset," she said. "On stage, you can yell and scream, and it's OK."

"More than OK--participants are actually applauded for it. The adrenaline that comes from performing on stage can have a powerful effect," Vorenberg said. Senior arts groups that have a performance element can tap into that benefit.

In addition to the SOAP Troupe, there are several local performance groups dedicated exclusively to working with seniors, including the New Horizons Band. Band members need only be age 50 or older and can have any level of musical experience, from beginner to proficient. The band, which is part of a national organization that features more than 150 senior bands throughout the country, has regular concerts to allow members to show off their skills.

Performing as part of a group gives participants a feeling of being needed and important, Vorenberg said.

Particularly in theater, there is an incredible "esprit de corps" that builds up between the members, she said. Theater is a chance for seniors to feel needed. Whether they are setting up props or delivering a line, what they do impacts everyone else.

At the end of the day, there is that unmistakable sound of applause. "And that's better than a trip to the doctor," Vorenberg said.