

THE ARTS

KNOW NO AGE

◆ Local program is on the forefront of the 'creative aging' movement

BY ARCHANA PYATI

In a former school building tucked in a residential subdivision off Veirs Mill Road in Rockville, Peter Burroughs' voice soars through the room, expertly ascending and descending the notes of a Mozart aria.

As young prince Tamino from "The Magic Flute," Burroughs enlists the help of his audience, a bicultural group of seniors at The Support Center, an adult day care for those struggling with isolation, memory loss or dementia. An evil serpent is after Tamino, and he is beseeching the crowd for a speedy rescue. Three women are spontaneously cast in the role of the Magic Ladies; only they have the power to kill the snake with an imaginary ball of fire, Burroughs tells them.

"Ayúdame!" he sings to the Spanish speakers in the room, crying out, "O Help Me!" in his next breath to everyone else. The participants play essential roles in the drama unfolding before them as the rich sound of Burroughs' tenor fills the space above.

Switching seamlessly between Spanish and English, Burroughs explains that operas are simply "stories told with music," ones that, fortunately, can easily be told in many different languages.

While it's hard to tell how many in this group were operagoers in their youth, it's clear how captivated they are by Burroughs' voice and the classical music playing in the background.

"You know that down feeling you get sometimes? I don't have that feeling" today, says Janice Battle, 71, as she settles into a post-performance lunch.

Burroughs, a professional opera singer and performer, is a teaching artist for Arts for the Aging, a unique program where local performers and artists creatively engage with the elderly to stimulate their minds and bodies, boost their self-esteem and encourage them to make connections with one another.

Bethesda philanthropist and sculptor Lolo Sarnoff began the organization in 1988, after she was approached by the National Institutes of Health to give arts

ABOVE: Teaching artist Peter Burroughs performs using castanets alongside a program participant who trained as a professional dancer in her youth.

LEFT: Burroughs engages participants (from left) Alice Kelley, Maria Barrero and Ruth Franke in a dramatic scene from "The Magic Flute."



PHOTOS COURTESY OF BRANDI ROSE, ARTS FOR THE AGING

workshops to people with Alzheimer's.

Arts for the Aging—or AFTA—is on the forefront of a movement called “creative aging,” in which the aging brain—if stimulated by artistic and cultural expression—is seen more as an asset than a liability. “It’s flipping the age-old paradigm, saying that there’s potential and that [the elderly] have so much to give,” says Janine Tursini, AFTA’s director and CEO.

The Support Center is one of 15 senior care facilities in the county and around the Washington region with which AFTA partners. AFTA selects partners located in residential neighborhoods to provide the greatest access to low-income and cognitively impaired adults who are living with family members. One of the potential benefits of AFTA’s workshops is a more harmonious relationship between seniors and their caregivers.

“The day-to-day work of a caregiver can be challenging,” says Tursini. AFTA workshops can allow them to see those in their care in a different light. “When they see the joy and vitality, the staff treats

them differently. They see them as more human and whole.”

Donna Cross, activity director at The Support Center, values AFTA’s workshops and plans her schedule of client activities around them. “No matter what their level, everyone can relate to music,” she says. “It calms them, it helps them establish other relationships... They’re very happy, very upbeat after the program.”

AFTA estimates 61 percent of its program participants have either Alzheimer’s or another cause of dementia, with another 23 percent suffering from other forms of memory loss. In its annual report, based on observations by its teaching artists, AFTA estimates that 38 percent of workshop participants showed an increase in smiling, 11 percent improvement in posture and 26 percent more interaction with peers.

“Engagement in the arts, when it’s regular, can contribute to mood improvements and health outcomes,” says Tursini. A 2006 study on creative aging programs

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funded by the National Endowment for the Arts reflected similar outcomes in its comparison of 150 seniors attending cultural programs in three cities, including Washington, with the same number in a control group. The seniors in the experimental group reported fewer visits to the

doctor, less prescription and over-the-counter medication usage, less frequent falls and better overall health compared with those in the control group.

While their work is therapeutic, Tursini and Burroughs clarify that they are not therapists. A music therapist might design a specific therapeutic plan for a patient, but the level of artistry to create a joyful, community experience might be missing. By offering the talent and skills of a trained artist like Burroughs, AFTA gives senior care administrators a unique service. “Since we work with professional, working artists, it ups the caliber of the work that we do,” says Brandi Rose, AFTA’s program director.

“I’d like you to be childlike with me,” Burroughs requests of his audience in the opening segment of his workshop, which he calls “CoOPERation.” Role-playing, make believe and physical play, with participants assuming the identities of

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band shell there and we usually do something in Kensington on Antique Row on Saturdays when they have the farmers market," says Vernier, who described the members of his group as "serious hobbyists."

"We're not usually getting paid to play," says Albert. "The pleasure for many of us is just getting together and making music as best we can."

For those looking to join a band or take in some traditional jazz, The Potomac River Jazz Club website is a great resource. It features a calendar of events, listing where Dixieland bands are playing locally, and updates on the Normandie Farm jam session.

It was at such a session that Albert found his way back to Dixieland music. After listening for a bit, he was invited to play "and it was déjà vu all over again. I found I could kind of hold my own with real musicians," says the retired newsman. "I'm back in the swing, taking lessons, going to jam sessions and playing in bands. It's like I'm 18 or 19 years old again."



Bob Vernier leads the Dixieland jazz group known as Dixieland Express as it performs at Bethany Beach, Del., last August. He plays cornet and sings.



Burroughs serenades program participant Alice Kelley during his CoOPERation program at The Support Center in Rockville.

characters from opera classics like "The Marriage of Figaro" and "Carmen," are staples to engage the audience. Cooperation, he says, is his favorite word because "opera" is right in the middle and reminds him of the collaborative nature of art.

Alice Kelley, 68, sang along with Burroughs each time he came near, singing a few inches from her face and holding her

gaze as he did with each participant in the room. It didn't matter that she didn't know the words; she sang along anyway, matching the "ohs" and "ahs" of the song lyrics with her own sounds. "It makes me feel happy," she says, beaming, after the class.

In the program, there are no wrong answers and everyone's response to art, music and poetry is valid. According to Tursini, "There's no 'no' in art, there's just yes, and...."



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