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Art and music erase limitations

By Barbara Ruben

With a flourish of his bow, Anthony Hyatt segues from playing an Irish jig on his violin to "The William Tell Overture," whose galloping tune is perhaps better known as "The Lone Ranger" theme. Next, he plays some golden oldies.

Just a few notes into the songs, many of the participants of the Kensington Club, a program for those with early memory loss, join in, singing every word.

"Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag, and smile, smile, smile," sings Susan Hoffman, 74. And when she's at programs like this one provided by the nonprofit Arts for the Aging, Hoffman is indeed often beaming.

"I always sing along," she said. "I sometimes don't remember where I am, but I remember these songs."

Participant Len Wagner, 85, shares a similar sentiment. "Music is something you don't lose throughout your life, no matter how your circumstances might change. Music is wonderful," he said.

Transcending troubles

That's certainly the intention of Arts for the Aging. No matter if a stroke has made someone's gait ungainly, or Alzheimer's has robbed them of the ability to remember what happened earlier in the day, arts — from dance to painting to poetry — can help people move beyond their physical or cognitive disabilities, says the organization's director and CEO, Janine Tursini.

With a faculty of 13 "teaching artists," Arts for the Aging brings a variety of on-going arts programs to more than 600 older adults at 21 centers throughout the Washington area. In addition to its traveling artists, the 26-year-old organization, based in Rockville, Md., includes a dance company called Quicksilver, whose dancers are age 65 to 95.

"I think the impact of arts stems from the validation and the joy that come from putting something new out there," Tursini said. "Having a teaching artist that really nurtures that and helps them understand the beauty of what they have to say, and how they move, and the stories they have to tell, feels so good. The arts have this transcendent way of leveling playing fields."

Violinist Hyatt, who also works with the



Artist Nancy Havlik works with an Arts for the Aging participant creating a collage. Arts for the Aging's programs span visual art, music, dance and poetry, and allow older adults with cognitive and physical limitations to let their imaginations soar.

dance company, enjoys engaging in repartee with the Kensington Club's participants. The "William Tell Overture" spurred memories of watching "The Lone Ranger," while the song "Happy Days Are Here Again" led to a discussion about the recent Ken Burns documentary "The Roosevelts: An Intimate Portrait."

"They become enlivened. They may have cognitive loss, but they still have strong imaginations," Hyatt said.

Coming alive through improv

The improvisational nature of some of the performing and literary arts programs can also be inspiring.

"Improv is so helpful because...finding a successful mode of expression is like a re-

lief. People are always asking them, 'Do you remember? Do you remember?' It is kind of like letting them off the hook," said Colleen Kemp, the manager of the Kensington Club.

Teaching artist Nancy Havlik thinks art helps people with Alzheimer's overcome their limitations and find something worthwhile within.

"I think for people who have a diagnosis of dementia or Alzheimer's, the world kind of dismisses them. There's an assumption that they don't have anything to offer, which is really not true at all," she said.

"We see people share their own stuff and come alive in sharing it. I'm continually surprised by the expressive beauty of

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Arts for aging

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people's stories and their voice. It's something that's empowering to people, and I think it's also a lot of fun."

Havlik works with Quicksilver, which rehearses weekly and takes performances to conferences and nursing homes, where members help introduce frail seniors to dance.

She also teaches a class called Moving Art, in which participants with a range of disabilities view famous artwork and learn about the artist before creating artwork of their own.

Havlik, who has worked with the organization for 20 years, appreciates the fact that Arts for the Aging provides artists with employment. "It's hard to be an artist in the world right now, so it supports my own work," she said.

Arts for the Aging helped Carol Siegel establish a second career. The photographer and high school teacher went back to

school at age 55 and got a master's degree in expressive arts therapy.

Now 75, she combines poetry and art in her program. She uses the short, structured poetry of Japanese haiku as a way to engage participants in language, and also creates art with them.

Proven health benefits

These and other benefits of engaging in the arts are supported by empirical data.

A year-long study of 166 older adults in the Washington area, published in the journal *The Gerontologist* in 2006, found that older adults who were engaged in community-based cultural programs had higher overall physical health, fewer doctor visits, fewer falls, and used less medication than a control group, whose health declined during the study.

Arts for the Aging's own research at each of its workshops shows increased engagement by participants. For example, their research during 2013 found that be-

fore the program, only 43 percent of participants were smiling, while 83 percent were beaming by the end. While 52 percent were interacting with others before the program, 79 percent were afterward.

They have discovered that more progress is made when programs are offered on a weekly or biweekly basis over a number of sessions.

For example, one participant had discovered she was a talented visual artist though an Arts for the Aging program. She developed an excellent technique working with her right hand.

Then she suffered a stroke, and suddenly had to switch from using her right hand to her left. It was challenging, but she was driven to succeed, "knowing she had this group to come back to, knowing she had a teacher who not only taught her how to draw, but encouraged her to keep going," Tursini said.

"I think she felt her drawings after the stroke weren't as good. With her right hand, they were very meticulous. [But ac-

tually,] the left hand is more free and even more expressive. They are incredible."

Havlik is also inspired by those she works with. "At first, you see the disability. Then, when you've worked with them for a while, you stop seeing the disability. I start seeing who they are as people and how interesting they are.

"These are people who have lived a long time, so they have amazing life experiences. That's what Arts for the Aging is really about. We honor people's own expression."

Honoring a Supreme Court justice

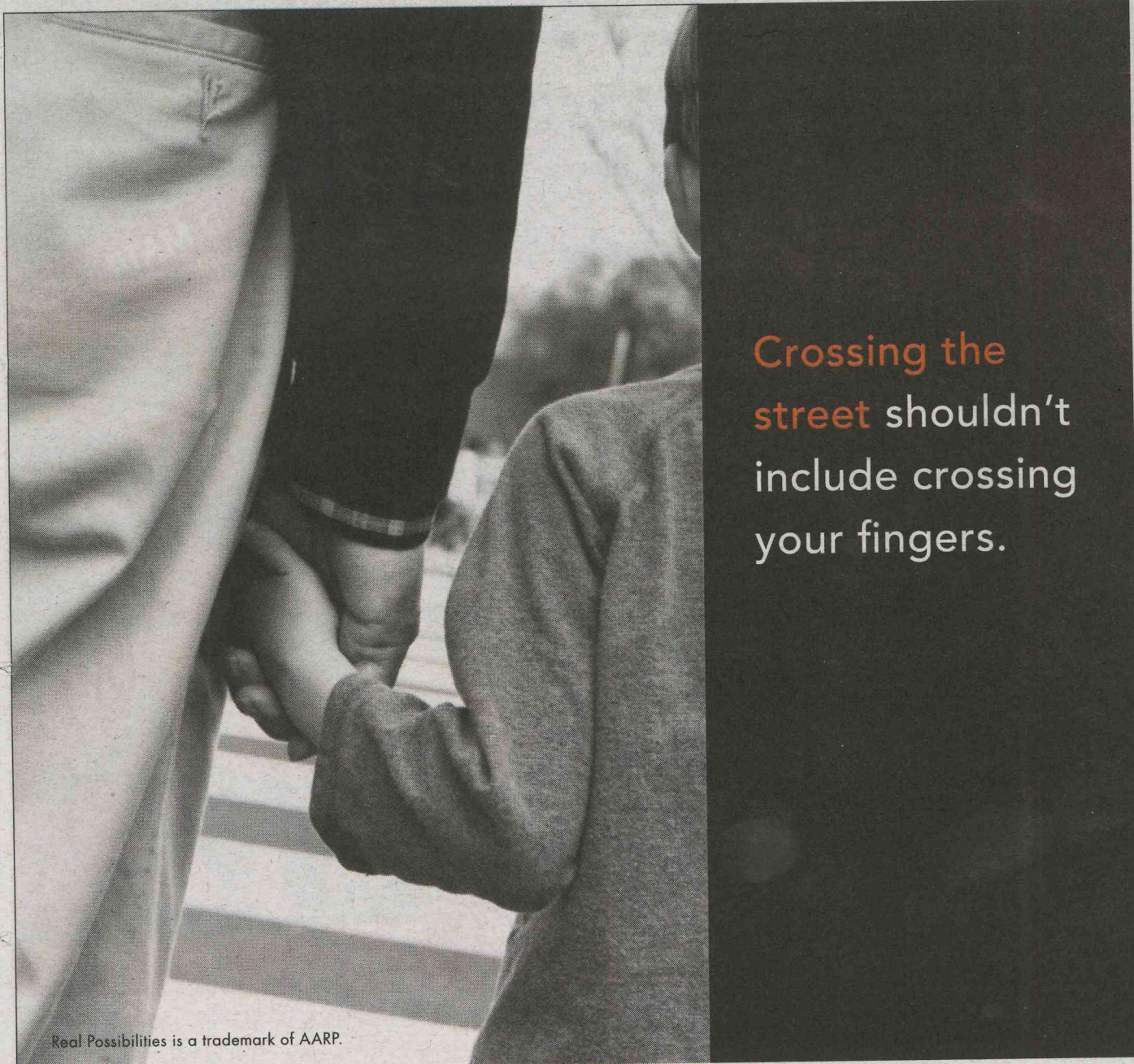
Almost all programs by Arts for the Aging are free and offered to those who are already participants at day and community center programs, as well as nursing homes and assisted living communities.

The organization is supported by foundations, for-profit companies and individual donors. Arts for the Aging is also developing a fee-for-service program for some senior living communities, as well as programs for adults who live more independently.

Its annual gala raises about one-sixth of the budget for the year. This year's gala will be held on Oct. 22 at the Society of the Cincinnati's Anderson House in Washington, D.C. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg will be presented with the annual Lolo Sarnoff Award.

Sarnoff, now 98, founded Arts for the Aging in 1988 and is friends with Ginsburg, who has been a supporter of the organization for years. Tickets for new donors are \$150.

For more information about Arts for the Aging, see www.aftaarts.org, email info@AFTAarts.org, or call (301) 255-0103.



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BEACON BITS

Nov. 7

MEET YOUR STATE LEGISLATORS

The Arlington and Alexandria

Commissions on Aging will hold a

legislative forum on Friday, Nov. 7,

from 9:45 to 11:30 a.m. at the

Fairlington Community Center, 3304

S. Stafford St., Arlington, Va.

Senators and delegates representing

Arlington and Alexandria have been

invited to participate to provide an

opportunity for the public to discuss

aging issues with them prior to the

General Assembly session that

begins in January. For more informa-

tion, visit [http://commissions.arling-](http://commissions.arlingtonva.us/coa/)

[tonva.us/coa/](http://commissions.arlingtonva.us/coa/), or contact the

Arlington Agency on Aging at

ArlAAA@arlingtonva.us or

(703) 228-1700.