Tips for Working with Older Adults

• Ask open ended questions and weave all the answers, even nonverbal ones, into the poem that the group is creating.
• Remember, you can’t win an argument with a person with Alzheimer’s; go with their reality because there’s no reason why their reality has to conform to ours.
• Follow their lead in topics.
• Ask one question at a time.
• Allow plenty of time for them to process what you’ve said; a bit of silence is ok.
• When you repeat responses back use the name of responder to validate their contribution to the poem.
• Accept and acknowledge all responses to build trust; resist the urge to correct, but redirect when necessary.
• Believe in the process and be sure to enjoy yourself.
• It’s not unusual for people to fall asleep (due to medications, fatigue, etc), so make your presentation as lively as possible.
• If participants become agitated or need special assistance you should immediately call for staff assistance.

Tips for Recruiting Your Audience

Become acquainted with the Activity Directors and Recreational Therapists at retirement communities, nursing homes, etc. For licensing renewals, facilities are required to provide a certain number of activities and outings for their residents. So, you are doing them a favor when you offer a program either at their location or at the library. Ideally, you should contact them 3 months in advance.

A relatively new concept in elder care is called “person-centered care.” Participatory cultural programs can be a perfect example of this concept, so facilities may be very receptive to a poetry project at their site.

Research That Supports Poetry Programs for Older Adults

In designing this project, we drew upon the work of Kenneth Koch, I Never Told Anybody: Teaching Poetry Writing to Old People, John Fox, Poetic Medicine and Nicholas Mazza, Poetry Therapy: Theory and Practice and Gary Glazner, Sparking Memories: The Alzheimer’s Poetry Project.

• “Seniors relish the opportunity to be creative and to express their unique thoughts and feelings in workshops and sessions that are customized to their interests.” Enhancing the Quality of Life for the Frail Elderly: Rx, the Poetic Prescription by S. Reiter.
• “Reading, writing and reciting poetry can assist the elderly in transcending loss, increases expression of affect and improves interpersonal and intergenerational relationships.” Poetry Therapy: Theory and Practice by Dr. Nicholas Mazza.
• “Poetry experiences can spark previously untapped creative energies and may help improve or revive memories.” The Age of Creation by Mary Beckman.
• Dr. Gene Cohen’s Creativity and Aging Study found that older adults who participate in creative expression activities are less depressed and lonely, have fewer falls and doctor visits and have increased activity levels. Several studies indicate that music (and by extension poetry/verse) can still be recalled by patients with dementia and Alzheimer’s even when they can no longer form sentences. Music and poetry activities can give these patients a feeling of success and increased vitality.

For more information visit www.poetrygso.org or contact Project Director Steve Sumerford (336) 373-3636 or Steve.Sumerford@greensboro-nc.gov
“Imagine a group of older adults sitting in a circle reciting favorite verses, telling lively, often poignant stories of how they first learned the verse, and then as a group writing their first poem.”

Such a poetry program can be as simple as one library staff member spending a couple of hours per month facilitating activities with a group of older adults in the library or at a community site. Or, it can be as elaborate as having dozens of trained volunteers spreading out all over the community conducting such programs in nursing homes, hot lunch sites, assisted living programs and faith-based facilities. Whichever route you choose, a poetry program with a group of seniors is sure to be meaningful and enjoyable for everyone.

Why Poetry and Older Adults

Evidence-based research shows that poetry and other forms of cultural expression offer myriad benefits for older adults:

- improves interpersonal and intergenerational relationships
- helps improve memory
- decreases stress, lowers blood pressure, and increases positive short and long term mood changes

Where to Begin: Community Assessment

Here are some of the key questions to consider:

- What types of cultural programs for older adults are already available in your community? Would a poetry program fill a gap or would it be redundant?
- What are the nonprofit groups and government agencies that provide services to older adults? Could some of them be potential partners?
- What is the library’s capacity for increased programming for this population? How many hours of staff per month can you devote to such a program?

Program Design: Questions to Ponder

Once you decide that there is a need for a poetry program for older adults, there are several models to consider and questions to ponder:

1) Outreach or In-house: Do you want to take programs to nursing homes, hot lunch sites, faith-based groups, assisted living and retirement communities, etc., or do you want to attract an audience of adults who are able to come to the library independently? Activity Directors in most senior living facilities are always looking for interesting outings for their residents and often they can provide the transportation.

2) Will the program be conducted by library staff, trained volunteers or local poets?

3) Do you want to develop programs that are highly participatory with lots of discussion, reminiscing, writing of group and individual poems, or do you prefer a program that is more of a presentation/performance?

4) Who is the primary audience you aim to attract — participants who are cognitive and “high functioning” or adults with memory loss and other cognitive issues?

5) Is it a year-long project or confined to one-month (e.g. April: National Poetry Month or May: Older Americans Month)?

The LifeVerse Model

Developed by the Greensboro Public Library LifeVerse is three-year-old project developed in partnership with the Adult Center for Enrichment and the Center for Creative Aging-NC. Community volunteers and “professional” poets present programs and facilitate conversations about the poems and verses which have special significance for older adults. This intergenerational project has provided opportunities for:

- older adults to share stories about their “lifeverses” (favorite verses of poetry, scripture, songs)
- older adults to work with facilitators to write their own poems
- younger adults, including high school and college students, to sit with older adults and learn about the verses and poems that are meaningful to them

LifeVerse poets and trained volunteers go out in pairs to a variety of community sites. Each site is visited a minimum of three times so that the participants have a chance to develop a relationship with the facilitators and with each other. The objective of the first session is to learn the interests and cognitive abilities of the participants. Also, because many seniors assume that all poetry must rhyme, volunteers introduce free verse poems as well as familiar rhyming poems. At the second and third sessions, the volunteers bring in poems based on what the participants’ interests. Also, the volunteers lead the group in writing a poem together. Between sessions some individuals choose to write their own poems and often will bring them to the next LifeVerse session.

Introducing the Project to Participants

Is there a poem or verse that is particularly significant to you? Perhaps it was read at your high school graduation. Or maybe it was a nursery rhyme you learned at your mother’s knee. Maybe it’s a verse of scripture or lyrics of a favorite song. Or it could be a poem by Alfred Lloyd Tennyson or Langston Hughes. Or maybe it’s a poem that you wrote yourself! Whatever it is, we want to hear your particular LifeVerse and why it’s meaningful to you."

LifeVerse Project Goals

The goals of this project are:

1) To provide poetry experiences that address the needs, interests, desires, hopes and fears of Greensboro’s older adults;
2) To use poetry, through an intergenerational project, to connect our elders to the overall community, based on the belief that elders have much to teach us about how to create a more just and caring community;
3) To use the LifeVerse Project to help the entire community better understand aging and end-of-life issues;
4) To use poetry to explore the following themes:
   - individual’s memories of early experiences with poetry;
   - how poetry can provide a meaningful way to review and reflect on one’s life;
   - how poetry can help relatives and caregivers better understand the lives of elders;
   - how poetry can illuminate, for the elder and the community, topics such as end-of-life issues, ageism and cultural differences in attitudes towards older adults;
   - how intergenerational experiences using poetry can be transformative for all participants;
   - how social workers, medical staff and others from the helping professions can use poetry as a tool for healing.
   - the use of poetry as a tool for staff development of caregivers.

Training Volunteers

Volunteers are trained in facilitation techniques and simple poetry-writing techniques. The training sessions last about 3 hours and are conducted by library staff, a poet and staff from Center for Creative Aging. During the training sessions, the volunteers are introduced to these modules: Working with Older Adults; Importance of Creative Expression Activities; Poems That Are Familiar to People Born 1920-1945; Contemporary Poems; Techniques for Writing Poems as a Group.

We recruited volunteers from colleges, churches, synagogues, writing groups and book clubs. Since our participants are ethnically and economically diverse, we make a strong effort to recruit volunteers who also represent this diversity.

Finding Participants

The library has formed partnerships with all the major agencies and organizations that have the mission of serving seniors, including retirement communities, nursing homes, adult day care centers and senior groups based in religious institutions. These partners are responsible for recruiting the participants.

The LifeVerse Planning Committee is composed of representatives from the partnering organizations. The committee assists library staff in all facets of the project including evaluation.

The LifeVerse participants fall into two distinct groups: the nearly 100 volunteers that we trained and the 500 seniors who have participated in three poetry sessions. Participants found multiple benefits from LifeVerse.

They were overwhelmingly pleased with the experience. Many rediscovered a love of poetry and most became confident that they could lead a “poetry circle” and facilitate poetry-writing sessions. The older adults indicated that they thoroughly enjoyed the way the poetry was a catalyst for recalling memories from their youth. Poems evoked memories of schools, tobacco barns, family and friends who have died, a wedding day, the civil Rights Movement, WWll and so much more. They recited nursery rhymes, scripture, rhyming poems and songs. Poets who were frequently recited included Shakespeare, Tennyson, Whitman, Frost, Dickinson, Killmer, Browning, James Weldon Johnson, ee cummings, Langston Hughes, Dunbar, Cullen.

Many of the LifeVerse participants wrote their first poem. Some said that they now feel comfortable writing poetry and that they intend to continue. At the end of the program, when we handed them a booklet with the poems they had written, there was a palpable sense of pride and accomplishment in the room.

What were measures of success and how were they achieved?

- 92% of volunteers said that the training and the volunteer experience was “very meaningful” to them personally
- 90% of LifeVerse participants said that they were “very glad” they participated in LifeVerse
- 92% of community sites said they would like for LifeVerse to continue at their locations