Force for good:
Older adults and the impact of intergenerational programs

Winner of the prestigious Eisner Prize, this initiative supports, mobilizes and empowers older adults in self-directed project teams to ‘address important issues and strengthen community life’

by Terry Kaelber, MPA, and Trent Stamp, MPP

Demographic shifts evidence an aging society. As the lifespans of Americans grew by almost 10 years from 1960 to 2015,1 birth rates declined.2 As a result, more Americans are now over 60 years of age than under age 18.3 For the United States (as well as for numerous countries with similar demographics), incredible opportunities come with a growing older population.

Older adults have a vast amount to contribute. In fact, they are essential to a thriving community. And when their decades of experience and skills are leveraged on behalf of, or ideally alongside, young people, these individuals make their communities stronger.

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During community-focused projects, enduring relationships are often formed between younger and older people, which strengthen the fiber of neighborhoods.

Image courtesy of United Neighborhood Houses of New York
During the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the portrayal of older adults as expendable and disempowered belied the contributions they made every day. Older adults jumped at the chance to learn new skills and continue connecting with students as nonprofits pivoted their tutoring and mentoring programs online. They volunteered for friendly calling programs, talking for hours with people of all ages who were feeling isolated. They helped care for grandchildren without schools or daycares to go to, and in extreme cases, assumed guardianship. They connected meaningfully with people, often younger than themselves, to help.

The Eisner Foundation has long recognized the value of older adults as the only US-based foundation solely supporting intergenerational programs. Its mission developed as the foundation saw the exponential efficiency and effectiveness of initiatives that bring older and younger people together. Not only do these programs impact the well-being of multiple demographic groups at once, but they also have long-lasting implications.

Young people are more empathetic toward older people and those with disabilities, and they do better in school when they have a caring older adult in their lives. Older people get an insight into the worldview of younger people and the structural challenges they face, plus they are measurably happier and healthier. These programs do far more than helping students with their homework or giving an older person an hour of friendly visiting. They facilitate mutual understanding and personal growth. They build community.

To give a national platform to exceptional intergenerational programs, the foundation established the Eisner Prize for Intergenerational Excellence, awarded in 2021 to the Institute for Empowered Aging at the United Neighborhood Houses of New York (UNH). The Institute’s work shows varied ways to activate older adults for healthier and more connected communities.

‘A new practice in aging’
UNH is a policy and social change organization representing 44 settlement houses that reach over 765,000 New Yorkers from all walks of life, including older people. These neighborhood-based social organizations provide services that identify and reinforce the strengths of individuals, families and communities. Programs build bonds, create networks, promote advocacy and develop connections both within organizations and throughout the wider community to solve community problems, and encourage community members to participate in civic life.

For more than a dozen years, UNH has striven to change how society views and values the increasing number of older
people, positioning long life and population aging as positive developments for society and communities. The organization launched The Institute for Empowered Aging to bring more attention to this perspective, which at its core sees older people as tremendous assets which, if mobilized for the greater good, would increase society’s capacity to address important issues and strengthen community life.

UNH refers to the work as building a new practice in aging. One rooted in the strengths, assets, skills, knowledge, life experience and passions of older people. And one aimed at bringing meaning and purpose to later life and ensuring we all remain a valued part of—and integrated within—the fabric of our communities.

The power of this approach was immediately clear when this work started. Older people mobilized to increase access to and use of fresh healthy food in six underserved food-desert neighborhoods across New York City. Over three years, working in partnership with UNH settlement houses and community members of all ages, 272 older people organized their neighbors and area youth to:

- launch six farmers markets, two farm stands and a fresh food buyers’ club
- establish or strengthen 145 food gardens
- build four chicken coops
- start a beekeeping cooperative
- provide more than 300 workshops on cooking and eating healthy food

In total, more than 126 tons of affordable fresh produce was brought into the neighborhoods. Much of this work continues today.

This work strengthened the health and well-being of local communities, while older people also reported improved health outcomes. Evaluating the initiative, the New York Academy of Medicine reported that increased physical activity from being involved in the community, along with better eating habits, meant that some participants reported a reduced need for medications, including for high cholesterol, high blood pressure and depression.

If this is what 272 older people can do, what could happen if just 100,000 of the 1.2 million older people across New York City were supported and mobilized to address important issues in their community, working alongside others of all ages?

**Expanding the work**

That is exactly the vision of UNH’s Institute for Empowered Aging and its partner settlement houses. In 2013, UNH partnered with New York City’s Department For The Aging (DFTA) to extend its strength-based approach to aging into senior centers. This effort trained senior center staff how to mobilize, support and empower older people through the formation of self-directed project teams. These teams provided their programming for the older adults at the center.

Both age groups spoke of benefiting from these regular gatherings. Some youth who were shy or nervous due to insecurity about their ability to speak English or who had concerns about fitting in with their peers became more social. Youth also discovered that they could learn a lot from and have fun with older people. Although participation in these gatherings was voluntary, youth continued to attend, underscoring their commitment.

Older people spoke of learning about the power of listening. One team member said he learned that “...a willingness to listen and learn from the perspectives of young people led to deeper, more meaningful relationships, and this in turn taught [me] how to consider other perspectives.” In addition, the director of the senior center noted that “...team members felt their minds were much sharper because of working with other people. Presenting programs to the youth required thoughts to be well organized and expressed clearly—something they often were not called upon to do at this point in their life!”

Finally, staff at the organization noted that this experience changed their views about older people. Youth program staff learned that their assumptions and beliefs about older people were largely not true. They were surprised at how much older people had to contribute: “...we are talking about individuals with so much experience...[they] are able to keep up with the criteria I put on them about making action plans and lesson plans and how...to engage the youth, better than some of my staff....”

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**Sunnyside Community Services: A case study**

Conducted by Katie Cardwell, Professional Development and Data Manager at United Neighborhood Houses

Sunnyside Community Services worked with United Neighborhood Houses of New York to form a self-directed project team of eight older people from its senior center. A new afterschool program recently opened in the same building as the senior center, and since several team members were former educators, they expressed interest in designing and offering afterschool programming. Working under the guidance of youth program staff, the team built its programming around specific topic areas (healthy food, exercise, art, aviation, etc.). The project teams provided their programming on a regular basis, which proved to be so popular with the younger people that they decided to design and provide their own programming for the older adults at the center.

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teams of older people were tasked with identifying important local issues and then implementing projects to address them.

A self-directed team is a multiskilled group of volunteers who share responsibility for addressing a community issue or need. In partnership with a community organization, each team is empowered to take full responsibility designing solutions and executing actions resulting in tangible outcomes. Teams have a specific structure and are trained in team processes, decision-making, goal setting, and team-building practices. They also receive training in project planning, conflict management styles and approaches in how to define and measure success. Team sizes range between four and nine members, and then recruit others to help in their efforts.

Initially piloted in four senior centers, these project teams—23 to date—have formed within 16 settlement houses across New York City. They have addressed issues such as:

- community safety and emergency preparedness
- advocating for affordable housing
- building cultural awareness and inclusivity
- creating an age-friendly community district
- launching an urban farm on public housing land
- increasing access to ESOL [English for Speakers of Other Languages] classes
- building the literacy skills of preschoolers
- providing career coaching to high school students
- launching a community food pantry

Data from the City College of New York show the impact of participation on older-adult team members. More than nine in 10 individuals (93%) reported that the initiative had improved their physical and mental health, while a similar percent (90%) said they were more involved in their community than they had been, thereby reducing social isolation and loneliness.

Since the self-directed team approach seeks to build pathways that enable teams of older people to be meaningfully integrated within community life, a core aspect of the work is intergenerational. For example, if a team were starting an urban farm on public housing land to serve as a community food pantry, group members needed area youth to help with the farming and distribution. If a team were addressing community safety and emergency preparedness, members sought out younger people to help with outreach and community presentations. Often, the result is enduring relationships between different generations that benefit both age groups and help strengthen the fiber of neighborhoods. Older and younger people recognize each other on the sidewalk, stop and chat, check in on one another and provide a helping hand when needed. [Ed. A case study of one program appears on page 53.]

Doing this work

Using a self-directed team practice can be an especially powerful strategy for building intergenerational programs that deeply engage a community. If an organization wants to do similar work and to fully realize the potential of this practice, there are some important commitments it will need:

- Commit to the values and principles behind a strength-based approach to working and partnering with older and younger people. Our experiences show that organizations that adopt and operationalize these values as core to their approach see the greatest impact from intergenerational work.
- Position this work and support it as consciousness-raising work for all in-

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**Lessons learned**

Here are some things learned over the past decade that are key for success in working with a self-directed team practice:

- **Be intentional.** Clarify your goals for bringing old and young together. Prepare staff and the different age groups to meet through discussions about age stereotypes and training around working in teams.
- **Helping versus empowering.** Programs where younger people “help” older people need to identify meaningful ways for older people to reciprocate and “help” younger people. If this does not happen, the relationship is one-directional and turns older people into passive service recipients, reinforcing ageist stereotypes and undermining strong meaningful relationships.
- **“Doing” is the best way to engage and connect older and younger people.** Enable generations to connect through doing and building something together by developing programs around areas of mutual interest to accomplish an agreed upon goal. In the “doing,” conversations occur naturally and relationships can develop organically.
- **Define commitment.** Try to be explicit when beginning a new intergenerational program about the level of involvement and time commitment needed. It may help people to say yes to getting involved if your program plans can be implemented in stages with defined time commitments (i.e., one meeting for a “meet-and-greet” stage; two meetings for a program planning and input stage; an implementation stage that will run for four months, etc.). This allows people to put their toe in the water gradually without committing to something they don’t yet fully understand. Interest and commitment can then build overtime.
- **Celebrate and have fun.** Find ways to have fun and to hold up and celebrate your intergenerational programming so you can make those involved feel valued and keep them coming back for more fun.
involved—about aging, ageism and the role of older and younger people in society. This gives staff and participants alike a shared vision of what these programs can achieve.

- Train staff how to form and support empowered self-directed teams of older people that know how to work intergenerationally. Some staff will immediately understand the opportunity this brings, and others may take more time. But they must be on board for programs to achieve their full potential.
- Foster a sense of reciprocity—where old and young contribute information and support equally. This empowers all involved and encourages long-term connections.
- Practice community engagement—bringing people together across age and difference to talk, imagine and create. This deepens the community's connection to and ownership of this work, identifies natural leaders of all ages, and builds a stronger, more interconnected and resilient community.

Also, providing pointers for success, lessons learned about self-directed team practice appear in an accompanying sidebar (see page 54).

At its heart, intergenerational connection is a practice based on mutual respect, deep listening, empowerment and partnership. It calls for us to be open: open to change, open to seeing the “expert” in all of us, and open to sharing decision-making and power.

As our demographics continue to shift and people live longer lives, we have an obligation to reimagine the place of older adults in society. We must value their expertise and encourage continued engagement in their communities. Intergenerational programs are one of the most effective ways to do so, with endless benefits for all involved.

Terry Kaelber, MPA, is the founding director of the Institute for Empowered Aging at United Neighborhood Houses in New York City. Previously, Kaelber directed New York’s participation in a national initiative to demonstrate the impact older people can have to drive change and strengthen communities. In 2022, he was named one of the “50 over 50: The Age Disrupters,” recognizing New York’s most prominent leaders in government, business and media over the age of 50.

Trent Stamp, MPP, is CEO of The Eisner Foundation in Los Angeles, California, and a leading expert on healthy aging and the benefits of intergenerational programs. He has been published on intergenerational issues in Harvard Business Review, Forbes, The Stanford Social Innovation Review and The Hill. Stamp is a board member for Grantmakers in Aging and serves on the Board of Academic and Policy Advisors at Milken Institute’s Center for the Future of Aging.

References


Resources

The Eisner Foundation
https://eisnerfoundation.org/

United Neighborhood Houses of New York (UNH)
www.unhny.org

UNH’s Institute for Empowered Aging