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CREATIVE CURRENTS

2007 MindAlert Awards

SONGWRITING WORKS, MEMORY CLINIC, UNIQUE SCHOOL HONORED

A songwriting program for elders with Alzheimer's disease, a memory clinic and workbook for everyday use and a unique intergenerational school were honored with the 2007 MindAlert Awards presented by the American Society on Aging (ASA) and MetLife Foundation during ASA's national conference in Chicago in March.

The MindAlert Awards recognize innovations in mental fitness programming for older adults by non-profit organizations in three awards categories: mental fitness for cognitively impaired older adults, programs for the general population of elders, and older-adult learning programs where mental fitness is implicit.

SONGWRITING

*"I'm 100 years old or so I've been told
But I don't feel my age at all
I'll live and find out what this life is all about
And I hope and I pray it's a ball!"*

—From "I'm 100 Years Old" by elders from the Jewish Home in San Francisco,
with Judith-Kate Friedman

"Songwriting Works offers elders with dementia a rare opportunity to be seen, heard, honored and celebrated through their own words and music," said singer-songwriter Judith-Kate Friedman, who began the organization in San Francisco in 1990. Friedman, who recently moved Songwriting Works (SW) to Port Townsend, Wash., describes SW's workshops as musical mural painting.

Friedman explained, "Professional songwriter-facilitators, trained in intergenerational music collaboration, engage three to 30 elders of diverse cultural and educational backgrounds, as well as varying physical and cognitive abilities." The workshops that focus on those with early-stage dementia, combine storytelling, musical improvisation and consensus building with the fundamentals of song composition, she said. SW's approach has been replicated in adult day health centers, as well as skilled nursing, assisted living and senior facilities, in cities as diverse as Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and Milwaukee.

SW workshops run 40-75 minutes, with songs completed in one or two sessions. Each session stands

alone as its own experience, but the songs are developed during as many as 10 workshops. Friedman or another facilitator begins each session by having participants sit in a circle and greeting individuals by name. The SW leader starts the session with a familiar traditional song and, whenever possible, with a song of the group's own making to reinforce and validate the group's creative voice. The facilitator then solicits ideas for a new song, including possible topics, themes and musical genres; the elders' input directs the session. While the workshop leader and elders interact, scribes—usually volunteers or interns—render elders' remarks onto easel pads verbatim. As melodies spring from the group, participants repeat and refine them to match the written words.

THE RHYTHMIC PULSE

“Group attention is kept in focus by the rhythmic pulse of a guitar,” Friedman said. Key components of what Friedman calls her failure-free approach include frequent repetition of gathered words, rhyme and word play, open questions, humor, passion, and sincere and enthusiastic acknowledgement of each participant. Staff and family may join in. Lyrics and music are recorded digitally.

Each workshop group decides what a song should include by consensus, she said. Although not everyone can verbalize their feeling, Friedman emphasized that “a clear group ‘yes’ can be felt when a theme strikes a majority, a meaningful topic resonates or a rhythm catches hold.” The facilitator listens and watches for strong responses including laughter, animated talk, reminiscences, poignant moments and ways to incorporate sonic or environmental interruptions into the process. Facilitators also watch for disinterest, discomfort or disengagement. As momentum builds, individuals experience their words, stories, values, concerns, humor, cultural or spiritual heritage, and imagination taking shape in a song that reflects all who made it. SW groups rehearse completed songs and perform them for their community.

Friedman has learned over the years that elders diagnosed with Alzheimer's “appear to retain the workshop songs in memory alongside songs they loved in childhood. Yet, these songs are wholly new and were learned after the onset of dementia.” The meaningfulness of phrases cued by memories and carried by melodies may be a factor in increased cognition, she said.

LEGACIES OF INSIGHT

Through songwriting, participants express tributes to family members, caregivers or staff; share their gratitude for life; and hope to leave a legacy of insight and wisdom for younger generations to whom they dedicate their songs. “Residents of a geropsych facility have been observed using songwriting to engage with others with whom they normally refuse to speak,” Friedman learned. Elders in the workshops have also shown increased positive affect, reported relief from pain and depression, and exercised increased thinking ability. “The circle of song appears to enhance both mental and social function,” she said.

Over the years, more than 2,500 elders, caregivers and family members—from 400 to 800 per year—have participated, composing and performing more than 250 original songs.

Elders have composed SW songs in English, Yiddish, Russian and Spanish, many of them bilingually, with assistance from professional translators. Among the workshop song projects have been tributes to Martin Luther King Jr. by elders of African American, Latino, Caucasian and Asian heritage; interfaith celebration of holidays; and freedom songs composed by Russian Jewish and African American elders to explore common themes for immigration. One program in San Francisco brought Spanish-speaking middle-school students of Mexican and Central American descent together with elder Jews in a skilled nursing facility.

Friedman is currently developing comprehensive training materials and intensive workshops. To learn more, visit the SW website at www.songwritingworks.org.

EVERYDAY MEMORY

“Each time we tell the story of our wedding, we may embellish the details about Aunt Jane's drunkenness (!) or the destruction caused when the dog ran through the yard, forever altering our memory for the details of the event. Nonetheless, the basic information remains logged in long-term memory, in permanent storage. Because well-learned information is locked into long-term memory . . . a song, a picture, a person, a smell can make old memories come pouring out of your mind, back to your attention. . . .” This passage is among the many insights in the *Everyday Memory Clinic Workbook*, the basic

text of the Everyday Memory Clinic (EMC), which aims to provide mental fitness training to adults 55 and older.

Created in 2003 at the University of Florida, Gainesville, the six-week program helped about 450 participants significantly improve their memory scores over those of control groups on average by 16% to 42%, depending on the task; increase their use of memory strategies by 23% to 41%; and significantly elevate their confidence in their memory by 23%. The program combines classroom sessions with self-paced learning.

LONG-TERM IMPROVEMENTS

“Previous research showed that memory can be improved with strategy training, but gains were rarely maintained over time. EMC fosters long-term change,” said Robin Lea West, director of the clinic. Among the most important findings of research on the effectiveness of the program, she said, were that EMC training increased participants’ memory scores on practical tasks, such as remembering stories and recalling names, with gains of more than 20% on most tasks.

Furthermore, West said, although scores decreased over time, participants maintained significant gains for at least six months after training. Also, trainees showed increased usage of memory strategies, up to 30% more on most tasks. Gains were strongest for trainees who read all assignments, completed all homework and engaged fully in class discussion, with weaker gains by those who participated halfheartedly.

The training program is presented to elders either in five classes of two hours each or in a self-help workbook format. Lessons focus on how to use five highly effective memory strategies: organization, association, mental imagery, a method for remembering prose or stories, and active observation for attention training. Those participating in a class also attend weekly meetings to discuss the material. EMC research showed that self-help training approaches using EMC manuals with limited class discussion were successful and very cost effective, requiring minimal staff time.

CONFIDENCE

Training-related gains for EMC participants were linked to significant improvements in feelings of control and confidence, an outcome 23% better than that for the control group. Previous research on beliefs about memory has shown that older adults not only have low confidence when it comes to memory skill but also believe they have little control over memory. “That often leads them to put forth reduced effort, resulting in less than stellar memory performance, even in the presence of only a minimal deficit in real ability,” West said. “Changing seniors’ feelings and attitudes about memory is just as important as changing their strategy knowledge and skill levels,” she emphasized.

West also noted that the EMC model proved effective with diverse populations, such as modest-income to low-income white and Latino Protestant churchgoers, affluent whites, and low-income African Americans from the Foster Grandparent Program. “Our experience suggests that individuals with low education may need supportive assistance from staff or friends to complete the homework,” West noted. “Nevertheless, all groups, including low education groups, benefited greatly from participation in the program and submitted very positive evaluations afterwards.”

West said EMC classes, which were funded by the Retirement Research Foundation for the program’s initial two-and-a-half years, are currently on hiatus while the clinic seeks further grants, but the manual and related replication materials are available. For more information, contact West at (352) 392-0601, ext. 240; e-mail: rwest.geron@gmail.com.

INTERGENERATIONAL SCHOOL

“I can have a challenge with the kids and they teach me too.”

“I am learning things just like they are learning . . . so both of us benefit.”

“It’s good for me if I can gain back even one point on my IQ.”

—Older volunteers at The Intergenerational School

Learning happens across the age span at The Intergenerational School (TIS) in Cleveland. The only such public elementary school in the United States, each class, from kindergarten through seventh grade, partners with a nursing home, where the mostly African American students visit elders once a month.

Older-adult volunteers provide tutoring and mentorship through such after-school activities as Museum Explorers, in conjunction with the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, and Computer Explorers, in which elders and children learn to use new software, pursue historical research via the Internet and develop PowerPoint presentations based on their findings.

How has this unique model of lifelong learning fared since it opened its doors in August 2000 with 30 students (kindergarten through second grade)? The current school year includes 108 children, with a goal of doubling that number in the coming years and expanding the program to include grade eight. In addition, TIS is the sole community school in the state of Ohio to receive a report card rating of excellent for three consecutive years.

TIS began in 1998 as the brainchild of Catherine C. Whitehouse, an educator and developmental psychologist who is now the school's principal; Peter J. Whitehouse, a geriatrics authority from Case Western Reserve University; and Stephanie FallCreek, executive director of Fairhill Center, a nonprofit collaborative campus dedicated to successful aging, where TIS is housed. Start-up grants from The Cleveland Foundation and St. Ann Foundation got the school going.

OLDER VOLUNTEERS

A primary component of the school is its trained volunteers program, which has involved more than 150 people since 2000. About 40 devote time at the school every week. Although most are at least age 65, "increasingly, younger adults, including college and high school students, are joining the ranks of our volunteers," according to Catherine Whitehouse.

Notably, Whitehouse said, although most volunteers are independent, some are frail or have cognitive impairment. "Because they are working on student-level readings and math skills, this does not pose much of a problem for the student interaction. The older volunteers are able to be in the moment with the students and still contribute substantially," she emphasized. She recalled that one volunteer with early Alzheimer's had experienced deep depression following her diagnosis. "Participating in TIS's program was something that reengaged her socially and mentally. It has improved the quality of her life as she learns to cope with the complexities associated with this condition," Whitehouse said.

Currently, she said, most volunteer time is dedicated to shared literacy activities. The volunteers read to the youngest children regularly, and as the older students' reading skills develop, they begin reading to their mentors. The readings are largely curriculum related or come from the TIS library's collection of intergenerational-themed books. "The older mentors share thoughts, ideas and memories while providing encouragement and positive reinforcement to the children," Whitehouse said. In addition, some volunteers work to assist children in the school library and others participate in a math mentoring program focused on improving students' scores on the state achievement tests.

WISDOM AND GARDENS

On their monthly visits to long-term care facilities, the children and residents interact through art, song, literature and storytelling. "The school's curriculum integrates these exchanges of older adult wisdom, along with the active involvement of family members, and daily-life connections to the community," Peter Whitehouse explained.

Besides the museum and computer learning programs, two horticultural programs integrate efforts to provide year-round outdoor and indoor gardening activities for TIS, said FallCreek, an expert in intergenerational programming. The Fairhill Center Intergenerational Gardening Group and the Integrative Studies Takayama Learning Garden at Case Western Reserve University provide an ongoing experience, matching an adult garden mentor with one to two children for planting and cultivating crops, then selling the produce at the local farmers' market. Related activities have included an intergenerational tea and the Butterfly and Sensory Garden Unveiling Ceremony.

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