

Creativity never gets old: In S.F., theyâ??re singing, dancing, writing, curating film, shooting video

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Negative stereotypes about older adults persist even today. But when it comes to creativity, old age defies the myths.

Tony Bennett, singer at 91, is still touring, standing for 90-minute performances. Rita Moreno, actress, at 87, is starting the second season of her Netflix show, â??One Day at a Time.â?• At 90, Queen of Suspense Mary Higgins Clark is still turning out two books a year.



Studies show that older adults not only exhibit creativity, but when they do their brains become more flexible, enhancing health and well-being. Participants in a community-based art program, part of a two-year study in 2006 by the National Endowment for The Arts, reported better health, fewer doctor visits, less medication usage, more positive responses on mental health measures, and more involvement in overall activities.

Creativity in the closet

â??Creativity has always been there with aging, but many have not recognized or searched for it in themselves in later life because society has so denied, trivialized or maligned it,â?• Gene Cohen, a pioneer in gerontology research who conducted the â??Creativity and Aging Study,â?• wrote in his 2000 book â??The Creative Age: Awakening Human Potential in the Second Half of Life.â?•

Looking back, there are many examples of creativity marching in on older age. Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw won the Nobel Prize for Literature at age 69 and continued writing until his death in 1950, at 94. In his book â??Back to Methuselah,â?• he said, â??You see things and say â??Why?â??

But I dream things that never were and say, â??Why not?â??â?•

Grandma Moses, first a farm-hand, then a wife and mother, started embroidering after her husband died but was thwarted by arthritis. Her daughter encouraged her to engage with her childhood love of painting, which was easier on her hands. She started at age 78 and won international acclaim with 15 one-woman shows in Europe. She continued painting until her death in 1961, at 101.

But creativity is not just a bastion of famous people. And itâ??s not some mystical or spiritual argument but rather something based on biological fact, argues clinical psychologist Francine Toder in her 2012 book â??The Vintage Years: Finding Your Inner Artist after Sixty.â?•

â??Creativity is a life force causing us to be resilient and adaptive,â?• she wrote.

Letting others show the way



Sheila Malkind founded the San Francisco Legacy Film Festival on Aging in 2011: â??We can make better sense of the events of later life through the stories of others.â??

Someone who knows about resiliency is Shelia Malkind, 79, creator and director of San Franciscoâ??s Legacy Film Festival on Aging. Despite the challenges of fundraising and the sheer amount of work, Malkind has persevered producing the festival every year since 2011.

â??I have a lot of energy,â?• she said, crediting the hills she walks regularly in her Castro neighborhood. â??I danced at a party recently for two hours straight. It was the first time I ever had a pain in my back.â?•

Malkind moved to San Francisco in 2003 with a masterâ??s degree in gerontology and public health. Before that, she spent 10 years at a Chicago ballet school as office manager, photographer and publicist. From 1999-2002, she was the director of Chicagoâ??s Silver Images Film Festival, which brought forward new films and videos that helped re-image older life.

â??We canâ??t deny the losses,â?• she said. â??But we can make better sense of the events of later life through the stories of others who, despite their burdens, have dealt with their lives in a positive and active way, thus giving meaning to their years.â?•

Shortly after she arrived in San Francisco, Malkind attended a program, â??Images of Older People in the Mediaâ?• at the Jewish Community Center of San Francisco. Encouraged by the publicâ??s growing interest in aging, Malkindâ??s business, the Legacy Film Series, was born. She present short film programs at the Jewish Community Center San Francisco, and put on programs at branches of the San Francisco Public Library, the Pacific Institute, and senior retirement homes and centers.

Seeing an opportunity in Malkindâ??s work, San Francisco psychologist Doris Bersing, CEO of the Pacific Film Institute, decided in 2009 to create the First International Film Festival on Aging. Even though the three-day festival was a success, Bersing decided her interests lay elsewhere. It was then that Malkind put in $9,000 of her own money, formed a board and in September, 2011, launched San Franciscoâ??s, Legacy Film Festival on Aging.

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In pursuit of oneâ??s passions



Stuart Habley has â??lots of passions,â?• especially making videos in his home studio with his wife. (Photo by Gene Cohn)

Creative potential is the ability to produce new ideas, according to Dean Keith Simonton, a University of California-Davis psychology professor emeritus and the author of more than a dozen books on intelligence and creativity.

That easily describes retired carpenter Stuart Habley, 69. The San Francisco Sunset district resident has â??a lot of passions. I get easily distracted.â?• Those include writing poetry, making short films, painting in watercolors, writing a memoir â?? and working on a screenplay based on his challenges as bi-polar. â??I donâ??t consider it an illness, but rather a gift. Thereâ??s the disease and then thereâ??s you.â?•

Hably, who collaborates with his wife, has a film studio in his basement. He calls his website Hableywood.com.

Beau Takahara, 73, turned to drawing and painting in childhood as a way to cope with a difficult life. â??I found joy in creating art. My family encouraged me.â?•

Tragedy begets a renaissance

She went on to work in the art field: program supervisor at The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, liaison for The Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art, San Francisco liaison for Art Against Aids, and director of the George Coates Performance Works. Takaharaâ??s involvement with the Tech Museum of Innovation, as manager of Individual Gifts, inspired her to co-found zero1.org, an organization that connects creative explorers in art, science, and technology.

But by her 60s, Takahara yearned to make her own art again. A suicide in a friendâ??s family led her to filmmaking. â??I was so moved by what can happen to a family that struggles with mental illness. I wanted to show that on film.â?• She enrolled in San Francisco City Collegeâ??s film program and eventually produced a short noir film, â??Body on Maplewood Drive.â?•

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While some people discover their creativity later in life, others have always felt the muse.



Charlene Anderson is the co-founder of the literary magazine Vistas & Byways: â??If you feel like doing it, really do it.â?•

Richmond District resident Charlene Anderson, 75, has always been writing, even when she worked. â??Iâ??m so tired, I canâ??t write,â?• she recalled. â??But, I have to write.â?• Her last job was as a grant analyst at the University of California-San Francisco.

Anderson has had one book published, â??Berkeleyâ??s Best Buddhist Bookstore.â?• But disenchanted with the book publishing business, she turned to other avenues. At a writing class at the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute in 2015, she met Mike Lambert, who had published an online literary magazine when living in a retirement community in the Sierras.

They pooled their talent to create â??Vistas and Bways,â?• an online literary magazine that features OLLI membersâ?? writing and visual art. An issue last year included an account of her time at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago.

Her advice to anyone thinking of writing: â??Go for it! If you feel like doing it, really do it. Itâ??s so satisfying.â?•

When luck provides opportunity

Creativity is the flame that heats the human spirit and kindles our desire for inner growth and self-expression, Cohen wrote. Sunset district resident Kaaren Strauch Brown, 82, sticks to a writing schedule of two hours each morning. â??Writing keeps me interested in life because I really study people.â?•



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Sunset district resident Kaaren Strauch Brown sticks to a writing schedule of two hours each morning: â??Writing keeps me interested in life.â?•

Drawn to science fiction and mystery, Brown aspires to emulate the late science fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin, whom she admires for her tough-minded, feminist bent. â??People write what they read. I liked fiction because unlike in my past academic job as a social worker at the University of Michigan, I can write whatever I want to. Science fiction can be hard science or social science, which is what Iâ??m interested in. I like to fit together all the pieces of a utopian society.â?•

In â??The Abril Legacy,â?• which she published in 2017 as an Amazon eBook, she explores corrupt and corrupting corporations and how therapeutic environments can lessen their influence on society. â??I have gotten some royalties, which makes me feel really good.â?• She has three mystery novels she also hopes to publish as eBooks.

â??You have to be a little good, but itâ??s better to be lucky than to be good. You have to understand when luck provides the opportunity.â?•

Shattering stereotypes â?? one step, two steps

Cohen described creativity as â??a process, an outlook, capable of transforming our lives at any age.â?•

It happened to Yope Posthumus at the age of 80. Prompted by a movie he saw on seniors and dance at The Legacy Film Festival on Aging, he took up intergenerational dance. Heâ??s been dancing with The Dance Generators ever since. â??It keeps me young,â?• said Posthumus, now 85. â??Movement inspires me to be more active.â?•

The Dance Generators are part of the University of San Franciscoâ??s Department of Performing Arts and Social Justice. The programâ??s goal is to shatter aging stereotypes and create bridges between all ages. Company members include people in their teens through their 80s.

â??Creativity is timeless. There are no age barriers,â?• said member Graecian Goeke, 64. She teaches movement and dance to preschoolers as well as older adults. â??I like the letting go that accompanies improvisational and contemporary dance.â?•

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Another dancer, Shelley Richanback, 60, said,â?• I am so grateful to be part of the group because I havenâ??t danced since I was a little girl. I love that we choreograph dances based on our own lifeâ??s stories.â?•

Creativity bows to neither disability nor dementia

â??We all may have infirmities but we need not be defined by them.â?• So said Cohen, who argued that to have a full and satisfying life in later years one must fight the grim connotation that comes with ageism. Too many people view getting older as a hopeless, downhill slide from mental and physical deterioration through major illness, disability indignities and death. He relates the story of Sarah Bernhardt, the celebrated French actress who at age 71 had a leg amputated. Playwrights were inspired to develop roles in which she could sit, and she continued acting until her death in 1923 at 78.

Neither dementia nor Alzheimerâ??s need be a barrier to creativity.

â??Scientific research from UCSF shows that the place where creativity resides in the brain, in the frontal lobe, is active even when people have dementia and Alzheimers,â?• said Lola Fraknoi, art teacher and founder of Ruthâ??s Table, a center for creative learning. She developed ArtKit, a series of activities designed to bring out creativity in people with memory loss.

Why are they so happy in Finland?

Julene Johnson was part of a 2010 study in Finland that showed older adults participating in a choir had higher levels of well-being than those that didnâ??t participate. The country has a long-standing tradition of choral singing. This led Johnson, now associate director of the Institute for Health and Aging at the University of California-San Francisco, to instigate a five-year study. Sponsored by the National Institute on Aging, its goal is to determine if community choirs promote health aging and independence. The results are currently being tabulated.

Johnson said there is a pressing need to find novel, sustainable and cost-effective approaches for promoting health and well-being among older adults. The percentage of adults over age 65 in the U.S. is expected to double by 2030, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. â??Our approach has been to focus on the biomedical sciences,â?• she said. â??I hope we can accelerate research into the area of the arts, to see them in a more democratic way.â?•

First steps in San Francisco

â??The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step,â?• wrote Chinese Philosopher Lao Tzu. Adults ready for that step can explore art, music, film and writing at the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (most classes are held in the downtown San Francisco State campus at 835 Market Street), the Fromm Institute at the University of San Francisco, and City College of San Francisco.

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