



# Engaging Aging

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## **Creativity Matters: Arts & Aging in America** *by Gay Hanna, Ph.D., MFA*

A new horizon has opened with opportunities for older people to utilize creativity through the arts to positively affect their health, wellbeing, lifelong learning and social engagement.

All people wish to grow older with dignity, leading lives filled with purpose and independence for as long as possible. The arts can be a key variable in achieving these goals by providing meaning and true connection between individuals, families and communities. Although currently limited in number, there is an extraordinary array of innovative arts programs for older Americans.

**CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT** The field of creative aging has developed several categories of arts programs addressing the needs of older people, from working seniors or retirees who are completely active to those with physical or cognitive disabilities, who are at home or in institutions. These programs all involve skill-building for and incorporate life experiences of participants.

A prime example is the **Levine School of Music** in Washington, D.C. One of the largest and most prestigious community music schools in the United States, this institution offers music education for students of every age, ability and background. To maintain the school's accessibility, it offers an extensive scholarship program based on both need and talent. Levine has a significant number and variety of offerings for adults, including the Senior Singers Chorale, voice lessons, community choruses, a noontime orchestra and the New Horizons Band. Among its other programs is fitness walking, which is followed by a discussion of the music the walkers listened to on their headphones during the walk.

**New Horizons** is a national program providing entry points to music making for adults, such as those with no musical experience or people who were active in school music programs, but have been inactive for a long period. Sponsoring organizations for New Horizons Music programs include music dealers, schools, community music schools, (Continued on Page 2)

Photo: Frank Klein/Am. Soc.. On Aging



*Dr. Gay Hanna currently serves as Executive Director of the National Center for Creative Aging, an Affiliate of George Washington University in Washington, D.C.*

*“I know artists whose medium is life itself, and who express the inexpressible without brush, pencil, chisel or guitar.*

*They neither paint, nor dance. Their medium is being. Whatever their hand touches has increased life. They see and don't have to draw. They are the artists of being alive.”*

*Fredrick Franck*

## ***Creativity Matters: Arts and Aging in America*** (Continued from Page 1)

college music departments, recreation centers and senior centers. A few programs are sponsored by Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes. There are currently more than 130 active programs around the United States.

**COMMUNITY BUILDING** Another key category is community-building programs. Social and civic engagement through participation in community arts programs focus primarily on social engagement and legacy work and are found through local arts councils or school boards with an emphasis on intergenerational and cross-cultural contributions

One leading national example is **Elders Share the Arts** (ESTA) in Brooklyn, N.Y., founded in 1979. The program works with elders to validate their personal histories, honor their diverse traditions and link them to younger generations through Living History Arts. ESTA's staff of trained professional artists works in conjunction with older adults and intergenerational groups in community-based settings throughout New York City, such as senior centers, nursing homes, schools and libraries. They have developed plays, literary booklets, murals, photographic essays and other projects. The works are presented to the community at large through annual Living History Arts festivals.



**New Horizons Band**

**Liz Lerman Dance Exchange**, Takoma Park, Md., is a cross-generational dance company that defines dance as a multidisciplinary art form. Lerman, a MacArthur "genius" award winner, tours her internationally acclaimed professional dance company, which includes accomplished dancers across the age span. However, the company also involved non-professionals through workshops and events that bring community groups together to experience the expressive power of dance and explore important issues through movement and stories. Performances are structures to incorporate participants' ideas, observations and experiences.



**Stagebridge Senior Theatre Company**, Oakland, Calif., is the nation's oldest senior theater company. Its actors, storytellers, students and volunteers range from age 50 to 95. The company's mission is to make theater accessible to older adults and to use theater and storytelling to bridge the generations and stimulate positive attitudes toward aging. Stagebridge's intergenerational programs include touring senior theater productions and storytelling in schools to stimulate language arts and social studies curriculums. For example, older actors in the literacy-based play Grandparent Tales bring storybooks to life, stimulating children to read and gather stories from their grandparents.

**HEALTH, WELLNESS PROGRAMS** Health-related programs achieve fitness through the physical and mental engagement found in music, dance, drama and other creative expressions.

**TimeSlips**, a national program celebrating the living memory of people with dementia, was developed in 1998 by Anne Davis Basting, director of the Center on Age and Community at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. TimeSlips stories spring from hour-long group storytelling sessions that include up to a dozen people in the middle stages of dementia. A facilitator plays down the importance of memory, using an image to prompt creative responses by asking open-ended questions and weaving together all the answers, from the poetic to the nonsensical, into a story. TimeSlips ([www.timeslips.org](http://www.timeslips.org)) has generated hundreds of stories, plays and art exhibits, while rekindling the hope for human connection among people struggling with Alzheimer's disease or related dementias.

**Kairos Dance Theatre**, based in Minneapolis, is a 19-member dance company spanning four generations, with performers ranging from ages six to 91. Kairos offers performances and opportunities for creative collaboration that celebrate people of all ages, abilities and experiences. The company proceeds from the belief that there are many ways of dancing, and that each person has his or her own dance to share and story to tell. The group connects with audiences in both traditional concert venues and in spaces where dance is not usually found, such as parks, libraries, nursing homes, museums and community centers.

## From the Offices of NRRO...

### Brother Robert Metzger, SM Associate Director of Planning & Education



The focus of this issue of *Engaging Aging* is on creativity and the arts. Here at the National Religious Retirement Office we have heard many marvelous stories over the years of our elder religious who are involved in various forms of the arts. We decided we wanted to celebrate that creativity with this edition of our newsletter.

I recently ran across the final report written in 2006 for a project entitled *The Creativity and Aging Study*. This study took place over several years in 3 cities across the United States using an intervention group that was involved in a weekly participatory art program and a control group. Compared to the control group, the intervention group reported better health, fewer doctor visits, less medication usage, more positive responses on the mental health measures and more involvement in overall activities.

Other studies have also shown a very positive impact on health and illness among aging Americans by being involved in various forms of creativity. If you wish to read the final report on *The Creativity and Aging Study* it can be accessed at <http://www.arts.gov/resources/Accessibility/CnA-Rep4-30-06.pdf>

On May 11<sup>th</sup> I sent a request to the religious institutes on the NRRO ListServ asking for pictures and a short caption of their elder members engaged in the wide range of art and cultural disciplines. The response I received has been overwhelming! To date I have received more than 150 pictures and stories of the involvement of elder religious in all forms of creativity.

I sincerely thank all of you who have taken the time to send me this material. At the same time, I must apologize that space will not allow us to use all the pictures we received. We are going to use as much of the material as we can in this issue and also try to utilize some in the next two issues of *Engaging Aging*. We may also try to use some of the photos in other literature we develop at NRRO for use by religious institutes.

I think the response we received shows that creativity is alive and well among our elder religious. Thank you for your response and thank you for continuing to add to God's creation.

## From the Editor's Desk

### Sister Sherryl White, CSJ, Ph.D., Psychologist, Pittsburgh, PA (with brother and sisters on the occasion of my Mom's 90th birthday !)



I must admit, I've never given much thought to the Book of Genesis. Apart from dramatic renderings of the verses that occur in the Easter Vigil readings, it just never captured my attention. But today, having just completed this issue of *Engaging Aging*, I firmly resolve to return to those words that take us through the Creation story.

I want to pray with every "Then God said," and "Let there be." I want to dwell with the miraculous "And so it happened," and revel in time's "evening came and morning followed." There is a primal energy in those words that speaks of untold beauty and wonder. Somehow, the world seems new again, free from the tarnish of wars, poverty, and abuse of power.

With summer's warmth it's time to join anew in the celebration of creation, in the wonder of life. It's time to see with fresh eyes the marvels that surround us with each shifting shape and passing hue. There seems to be so much for which to be grateful; so little about which to be bitter.

The men and women featured in this issue are creators in the finest sense. They call us to look closely at what seems ordinary, and like God, to see how good it is. They call us to a celebration of life. In summer's light, may we all be well.



# Engaging Aging

## The Inspired World of Brother Mel Meyer

by Linda Briggs-Harty

Inside and outside St. John Vianney High School in Kirkwood, Missouri, in chapels, banks, schools, hotels, offices and homes throughout St. Louis and in other cities, you'll find the work of Marianist Brother Mel Meyer, a testimony to his imaginative spirit and the ability to explore a range of subjects and styles.

This gift for juxtaposing the usual with the unexpected—elevating and sometimes tweaking our visual sensibilities—has resulted in more than the 8,000 works of art to date, no small feat by any measure. Yet looking back on it all, Brother Mel expresses both a sense of humility and amazement.

“My life’s been heaven on earth,” says this Marianist artist, designer and creative mentor, who is celebrating several milestones this year. On June 5, Brother Mel turned 80; in August, he’ll celebrate his 60th jubilee as a Marianist brother; and 2008 marks the 40th year he has operated the Marianist Galleries, his studio and gallery on the campus of Vianney High School in Kirkwood. “I’ve often wished all the brothers could have experienced what I have,” he says.

### An Artist’s Sojourn

During scholasticate and his undergraduate years at the University of Dayton in Ohio, Brother Mel helped two friends design stage sets for Shakespearean productions. Working with paints, crafting backdrops and designing scenery was all it took: Mel was hooked on art. It became his passion.

Though he taught religion and social studies in the early 1950s, by 1954 he enrolled in a summer program at Notre Dame in Indiana, and completed his master’s degree in art in 1960. A European sojourn in 1957-1958 solidified his artistic vision. Traveling 14,000 miles throughout Europe on a scooter, Brother Mel saw modern interpretations of Old World themes that would influence his art for a lifetime.

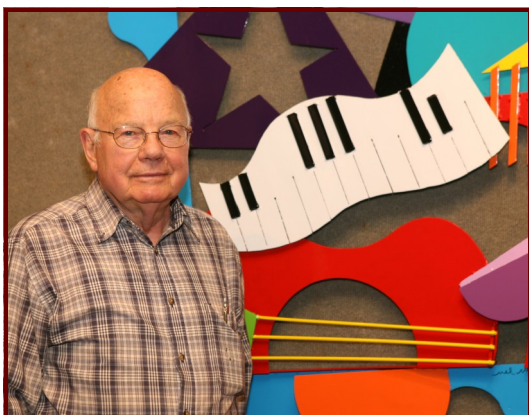


Returning home, he served as prefect of novices during the late 1950s and early 1960s, working on a variety of projects with novices and experimenting with art. As a novice under Brother Mel, Marianist Brother Tom Suda, an artist, master rehabber and wood craftsman, witnessed Brother Mel’s creativity emerge. The experience shaped his future. “His influence directed me,” says Brother Tom, who was trying to decide whether to teach or become a working brother. “He had so much energy and passion. All of us at the novitiate enjoyed helping him build pieces for feast days” (Continued on Page 5)

**Brother Mel Meyer, SM at work in his studio**



**Interior of Brother Mel’s Gallery**



**Brother Mel Meyer, SM**

## ***The Inspired World of Brother Mel Meyer***

(Continued from Page 4)

and other occasions.” The experience cemented Brother Tom’s decision to dedicate his energies to the life of a working artist.

By 1968, the Marianists gave Brother Mel the green light to convert an old farmhouse on the property of Vianney High School into a gallery. It was a turning point. He could now pursue his art full time. Since then, he has traveled many summers throughout the United States and in Europe with fellow artist Marianist Brother Joe Barrish for intensive painting and sketching.

### **A Hit in Nashville**

Recently, Brother Mel completed a metal piece comprised of 25 abstract squares painted with eye-popping enamel colors and welded with guitar shapes in the center for placement in the Arts Company Gallery, owned by Arts Patroness Anne Brown. Brown, who met Brother Mel at his gallery in 1997 while visiting friends in St. Louis, is writing a book about Brother Mel called *An Artistic Pilgrimage*. “His artwork is phenomenal,” she says.

“Brother Mel doesn’t want promotion, but the world needs to understand his contribution,” says Brown. “The power of his work stems from the fact that he is focused on spiritual and artistic commitments, which to him are the same.”

### **The Daily Commitments**

His daily routine reflects the equal pulls of religious life and modern art. Up at 5 a.m. for the Divine Office and Mass, he is immersed in private prayer from 6 a.m. to 7 a.m., and then has a quick breakfast before starting work around 7:30 a.m. Work stops at 5 p.m. and he reads a bit after supper. He’s in bed by 8 p.m.



**Sycamore crucifix**

Brother Mel is an active member of the Curé of Ars Marianist community located on the Vianney campus. Surrounded by friends, family and his Marianist community, Brother Mel is both loved and admired for his playful artistry, laid-back demeanor and faithfulness. Against this backdrop of support, he continues his artistic output with kinetic energy.

“If I were not a religious, sustained by my religious community, I don’t know if I could create,” he says. “People ask if what I do is religious. Everything I create is religious – because of the inspiration behind it, the motivation for doing it and the impact it has on the people looking at it. My faith and art are inseparable.”

Brother Mel works in many different mediums: fresco, handmade paper, acrylic, sculpture, functional furniture, glass and his currently preferred method, metal. The king of collecting, he uses castaway objects — old iron, steel, driftwood — either sought out or accepted from others. One feature epitomizes his style: color. Bold, brilliant tones are his trademark.

About his art, he says he can’t express its meaning. “It speaks for itself,” he says. He doesn’t stop much to reflect. “I continue looking ahead.”



**Metal wall hanging**

**EDITOR’S NOTE:** This article first appeared in *Alive: Marianist Culture, Faith and Community*, Summer, 2008. This edited version is re-printed with the kind permission of the Marianist Province of the United States; St. Louis, MO.

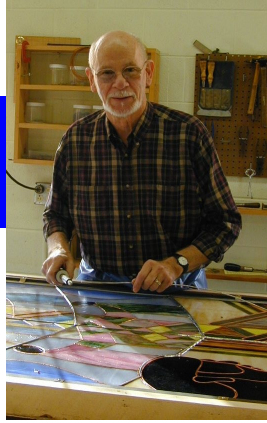




Sister Julie Knotek, SSSF



Sr. Dorothy Dwyer, OSF



Bro. Ray Albers, SVD



Sr. Lillian Kroll, OSF



Sr. Lorraine Ferguson, OP



Sr. Justyn Krieg, OP



CPPS Srs. Suzanne Besancenez, Viola Marie Spire, Rose Margaret Wessels, and Josepha Bauer



Sr. Mary Catherine Brechting, OP



Sr. Marie Eugene Charbonneau, OP



Sr. Paulino Crabb, BVM

*“Artists are the ones who make the invisible visible, who give words and colors and sounds and shapes to the human adventure...”*



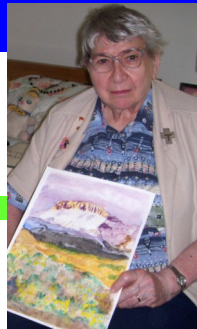
Sr. Mary Denis Bruck, SL



Sr. Ellen Hare, SHCJ



Sr. Connie, SSSF



Sr. Sigfrieda, SSSF



Sr. Malinda Gerke, FSPA



Sr. Ellen Hoffman, RSCJ

Milvale Franciscans Memoir Writing Group



Sr. Lois Beaucage, SHCJ

Dominican Sisters Blanche, Benignus, and Camilla







Sr. Mary Zirbes, OSF



Sr. Julie Stapleton, IBVM



Sr. Anne Davidson, RSCJ



Sr. Arlene Ashak, IBVM



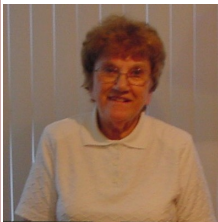
Sr. Xavier Fik, OSF



Br. Joe Barrish, SM



Nazareth, Michigan CSJ Poetry Group



Sr. Clarice Gierzak, OSM



Sr. Joseph Sagovac, OSF

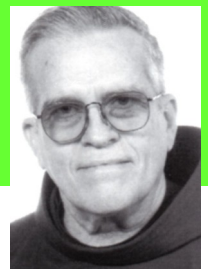


Sr. Jeaninne Marie Neumann, OSF

*They portray it in such a way that we understand more clearly who we are, how we are connected. "*  
*Jan Phillips,*  
*The Art of Original Thinking*



Sr. Margaret Peter, OSF



Fr. Miguel Loredó OFM



Sr. Marianne McGriffin, SP



Sr. Christella Buser, CSJ



Sr. Carmelle Zserdin, BVM

Sr. Pancratia Fik, OSF



Concordia CSJ Quilting Group

Sr. Luella, CPPS



## If Music be the Food of Love, Play On!

By Sister Mary Margaret Delaski, FSE/MT-BC

Director of Music Therapy, Franciscan Life Center, Lowell, MI



No one knew how Don, ninety years old and nearly blind, had fallen in love with the harp. For years he was a "receptive" harpist, accumulating a large collection of recorded harp music and listening to it for hours. He had never played a musical instrument. His nephew heard of his uncle's greatest desire: "I want to learn to play the harp." Shortly after that a new Troubadour Harp arrived from Lyon & Healy Harp Company in Chicago.

Don was ecstatic. A call from his sister led me to begin giving him weekly harp lessons in his home. He never missed a lesson, even on days when he had refused to get out of bed. As our relationship developed, Don began to share stories of his past. These were always woven into the lesson. The tears that he shed were ones that released long-held feelings.

When used therapeutically with elders, music has the power to influence their lives. With clear intent and conscious effort on the part of a trained music therapist, music can be used to evoke desired physical, emotional,



cognitive, social and spiritual responses. It can enhance wellness and improve the quality of life. The music intervention becomes the vehicle for change.

In what ways can music therapy be used with elders? The person adjusting to an assisted living facility can develop new relationships through a group music experience such as ensemble singing or playing in an instrumental group. Those with dementia or Alzheimer's, who may be finding it difficult to stay connected with life around them, can once again have a socially interactive experience through a group music therapy session. Improved physical functioning can happen through drumming or playing hand-held instruments. Singing or hearing familiar songs can calm the agitated and can trigger fond memories, providing moments of lucid thought. The person in the process of dying, transitioning to eternal life, can be supported with music which had been significant during life.

Music surrounds us and is woven into the fabric of life. For elders who experience so many changes, music can be the link connecting them to earlier stages of life. A non-verbal medium, its versatility is endless. Despite severe arthritis, early dementia and blindness, Don's quality of life improved through his active involvement with the harp.

To this day he continues to play!

## BEST-PRACTICE SOURCES

The **Creativity Matters: The Arts and Aging Toolkit** is a 236-page illustrated manual published earlier this year by the National Center for Creative Aging in conjunction with the National Center of Community Schools of the Arts and the New Jersey Performing Arts Center. It includes many program examples in English and Spanish and is free online at [www.creativeaging.org](http://www.creativeaging.org). Recommended by Dr. Hanna

**Releasing the Creative Spirit**, by Dan Wakefield. (2001).





## Video Games Conquer Retirees

By Seth Schiesel

Chatawa, Mississippi - For 133 years the School Sisters of Notre Dame have lived here in a thick forest just up the hill from the Tangipahoa River. In a modest but stately compound called St. Mary of the Pines, 52 retired members of this Roman Catholic order spend much of their time as the order's members have since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They read and garden, fish and sew. They pray five times a day.

But many also have a new hobby, one they credit for keeping their hands steady and minds sharp. They play video games. Every day residents go to the seven-terminal "Computer Cove" to click furiously on colorful, nonviolent, relatively simple games like Bejeweled, Bookworm, and Chuzzle.

Though they live in a remote grove, the women of St. Mary's are actually part of a vast and growing community of video-game-playing baby boomers and their parents, especially women.

Anxious about the mental cost of aging, older people are turning to games that rely on quick thinking to stimulate brain activity. A step slower than in their youth, they are using digital recreations of bowling, tennis, and golf.

A couple of hours before heading to a harmonica concert recently, Sister Jean Marie Smith paused her round of Bookworm (a digital take on the classic Scrabble word game) at the prodigious score of 34,765,180 to explain how she joined the gamer generation after moving to St. Mary's. She has attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder "and I just could not focus on anything," she said. "I constantly have to find things to keep my attention. But the first time I played Bookworm, and that red tile hit the bottom and I lost, I stood up and said, 'Me and this computer are going to have a talk.' The fact that it's interactive and also competitive really draws me in and helps me focus."

Sister Marie Richard Eckerle, who introduced the games at St. Mary's, smiled and said, "I hear all the time from sisters when they first see the computer, 'I can't do it, I can't do it.' And then they can do it. And they actually like it."



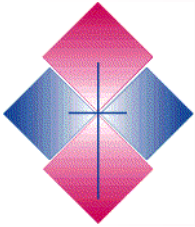
**Sister Jean Marie Smith, SSND**

*EDITOR'S NOTE: This article first appeared in The New York Times, March 30, 2007. This edited version is re-printed with the kind permission of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, Chatawa, MS.*

## Mark your calendars for 2009

- June: Distribution of Direct Care Assistance
- Distribution of Planning Assistance
- August 5-8: CMSM Assembly; St. Louis, MO
- August 11-14: LCWR Assembly; New Orleans, LA
- Sept. 11-12: CMSWR Eucharistic Congress; Washington, DC
- Sept. 17-20: NRRO/RCRI Bi-Annual Consultant In-Service; Plymouth, MI
- Sept. 28-30: Planning and Implementation Workshop in Marriottsville, MD
- Oct. 20-23: RCRI National Conference; Atlanta, GA





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*The National Religious Retirement Office coordinates the national collection for the Retirement Fund for Religious and distributes these monies in grants to eligible religious institutes for their retirement needs.*

*The National Religious Retirement Office supports, educates and assists religious institutes in the U.S. to embrace their current retirement reality and to plan for the future.*

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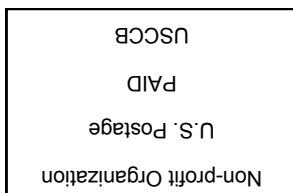
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