



Uniting the generations since 1978

STAGEBRIDGE

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Acting is giving and I still have a lot to give.
Cecil Pierce, 87, Stagebridge actress/student

Our clients are on a fixed income and cannot afford to go to movies or plays. Stagebridge offers an alternative, not just for entertainment, but to bring joy and laughter to many seniors.

Linda Diamond, Director, St. Mary's Senior Center

... definitely an important part of our nursing education.
Nursing student, Samuel Merritt College

Date

Name

Title

Org

Address

City, State, Zip

Dear _____:

I am writing to introduce _____ to Healthy Aging, an innovative program that helps seniors stay healthier through participation in the arts and educates healthcare professionals about older people, resulting in better communication and patient treatment. We understand that _____ has an interest in supporting programs that benefit the geriatric population, and hope that you will consider a \$10,000 grant to fund our program for older adults.

Organizational Description:

Since its founding in 1978, Stagebridge has pioneered ways of giving older adults a creative voice in a culture that denies aging and makes older people socially invisible. Our work with older adults is helping change the limiting stereotypes and negative attitudes that many people associate with growing old. We have developed life-enhancing programs to engage seniors in performing arts, brought together grandparents and youngsters to share life experiences through stories, and imagined how theatre can assist healthcare workers better relate to their elderly patients. Stagebridge is the oldest senior theatre in the nation and the only professional theatre training company for older adults on the West Coast. Managed by a small group of professional staff, the company is composed of approximately 150 actors and storytellers who

average 70 years of age. Recently cited as a “Model Program” by the National Endowment for the Arts, Stagebridge is committed to dispelling the notion of older adults as obsolete, non-contributing members of society, and to demonstrating the many ways in which seniors improve and enrich our culture.

Stagebridge currently has five overlapping program areas. They are: Theatre Training, which offers classes to older adults in the areas of beginning through advanced acting, improvisation, scene study, storytelling, and singing; Public Performance Season, which presents one or two new plays a year for public audiences that are mostly comprised of families, seniors, and children; Storybridge Schools Program, which brings intergenerational theatre, oral history, and storytelling by older adults to elementary school children in the San Francisco Bay Area; Healthy Aging (detailed in this proposal); and the Center for Creative Aging – West, a network of artists and organizations working with older adults that trains, produces, and advocates for creative aging programs.

Stagebridge has created and produced more than 30 plays about aging and toured them to over 250,000 individuals in senior centers, schools, nursing homes, libraries and theatres throughout the Bay Area. Last year, we presented 68 performances and 391 workshops for 27,450 people.

Project Description:

Stagebridge’s “Healthy Aging” Program is designed to help seniors stay healthier by participating in the arts, and employ the arts to educate healthcare professionals about older people resulting in better treatment. Our premise is: a) health is improved through active involvement with others, creative stimulation, and opportunities to flex the muscles of imagination b) the more that older adults are “seen” as human beings who still have much to offer, the better treatment they will receive by healthcare professionals, who routinely see them in their most vulnerable state, as dependent and ineffective. However, when they are able to reveal their experience and knowledge by participating in the arts, they not only alter their self perceptions, but also change the way others see them. This “shift of awareness” results in greater insight and sensitivity for both older adults and healthcare professionals.

To accomplish these aims, our program includes:

1. “See Me!” Training

“See Me!” provides training for nursing students, nurses, doctors, paraprofessionals and aides to improve their attitudes and be more understanding in their treatment of older patients – the most rapidly growing medical population.

In 2005, a grant from Johnson & Johnson and the Society for Arts in Healthcare enabled Stagebridge to inaugurate “See Me!” training with student nurses at Samuel Merritt College School of Nursing. Results of evaluations from the pilot program indicated that the program strongly impacted students’ attitudes and knowledge. The response was unanimously positive. Merritt College nursing professor Jennifer Winters commented, “I had never seen a group of students react in such a positive way to a classroom activity....This is learning that cannot be achieved from traditional models such as textbooks, films or lectures.” Subsequent evaluations showed that the nurses became far more aware of their patients as *people*, and thus more caring and sensitive in their treatment.

Word of “See Me!” Training spread among health educators locally, leading to invitations to expand the program to the University of San Francisco, UCSF and San Francisco State. This positions the San Francisco Bay Area at the leading edge of this promising new approach to geriatric practice. Now in its third year, the program has earned honors from the Blair L. Sadler International Healing Arts Competition, which cited Stagebridge for “one of the most innovative integrations of arts into healthcare that improves the quality of the health care experience for patients, their families and caregivers.” Stagebridge also was recently selected for an expansion grant from Johnson & Johnson/Society for Arts in Healthcare program. The company was one of 26 grantees nationally (out of more than 200 applicants). Dr. Gay Hanna of the Society of Arts in Healthcare called Stagebridge “pioneers in this emerging field.” Dr. Gene Cohen of George Washington University has described it as “groundbreaking important work.”

In See Me! Training, Stagebridge staff and actors work with nursing school staff to create learning modules that address specific issues that nurses face in working with older patients. These include: finding effective/affective ways to communicate, death and dying, sexuality, loneliness, among others. Stagebridge then creates a workshop around a particular issue that utilizes improvisation, storytelling, role-playing, and other performance techniques. The workshop is then presented and discussed. Our approach has several advantages over traditional lectures. We offer a senior “voice” and point-of-view, which is communicated with humor in performances and reinforced through small group interactive discussion.

Our long term goal is to produce replicable training modules that will include a DVD, program guide, and resource guide. We believe that this project will be a model for a variety of training programs for nurses and doctors, as well as for paraprofessionals and aides employed by nursing and convalescent homes and long-term care facilities. It may also have value as part of the continuing education programs for health care professionals.

2. Seniors Reaching Out (SRO)

This program is designed to bring performances of plays and workshops in music, singing and storytelling to approximately 10,000 seniors annually. Stagebridge primarily serves seniors in East Bay retirement communities/homes, convalescent hospitals, senior centers, and community organizations. These seniors are often unable to enjoy the benefits and creative stimulation offered by workshops or performances due to ill health, impaired mobility, or lack of financial resources. Audiences range from inner city to suburbs, from poor to wealthy, and typify the cultural diversity of the Bay Area. Many of these people are forgotten audiences, who rarely see anything more lively than television. Activity directors often remark that Stagebridge brings “light to their lives.” Older audiences connect deeply when they see their peers performing, especially when the stories or plays relate to their lives.

SRO was initiated as a pilot project in 2000. It was founded on an assessment of the senior facilities in Alameda and Contra Costa Counties made by staff at Stagebridge. To date, the company has presented 600 workshops and performances for over 32,000 people. The response of senior audiences and staff has been overwhelmingly positive. Staff and participants agree the quality of life, especially for senior adults with limited means and few resources, is greatly enhanced. Stagebridge provides life-affirming opportunities that offer inspiration, humor, entertainment and the opportunity to participate, interact and learn.

Each year the company creates an all-new version of its popular variety show “Never Too Late.” The musical variety show brings old age up to date and features a dozen talented senior actors

and singers. The company also commissions/creates other original plays designed to tour senior audiences. Our productions are always uplifting and carry positive messages that help many seniors recall happier times in their lives, which encourage an improved, healthier emotional outlook.

Stagebridge raises funds to provide these services free or at very low cost to facilities, so that there is no financial barrier. As the result of free introductory workshops, a number of facilities are now partnering with Stagebridge to have on-going workshops. Excell Health Care in San Leandro, Aegis of Pleasant Hill, Coventry Retirement Center in San Francisco, and Center for Elders Independence in Oakland are all co-sponsoring workshops at their facilities. They pay a small fee to offset our costs. Our goal is to establish new partnerships with other facilities to increase the number of workshops we offer and reach a wider senior audience.

Currently, Stagebridge has a very limited number of professional teachers trained in working in these community settings. We will address this issue in 2006-2007 by creating a Training Institute, as described in the next section.

3. Performing Arts Training Institute

Stagebridge will expand its theatre arts training program at Arts First Oakland in 2007-08 by inaugurating a new Training Institute. The purpose of the Training Institute is twofold: to expand learning opportunities for our constituency, and to develop a core of trained teachers to meet the growing demand for creative opportunities for Bay Area seniors.

Every 30 seconds a Baby Boomer is turning 60. In the Bay Area, the 60+ population ranges from 13% to 20% (in communities like Walnut Creek). The old model of senior centers providing arts and crafts and slide shows is of limited interest to the "new elderly." These people are often still working part time and looking for meaningful, engaging activity. Unfortunately, in the Bay Area, there are few opportunities for participating in the performing/creative arts geared to this population. Stagebridge is the *only* organization in the Bay Area that provides performing arts training for older adults. By expanding our course offerings the Company will better be able to serve this population.

Many of those who are 65+ or disabled, are limited in their ability to attend classes due to lack of transportation or limited/fixed income. (In fact, the fastest growing segment of the population is 85+). These seniors often live in retirement homes or attend local senior centers. There is a growing need to serve this population with programs that stimulate and engage the imagination and creativity. Stagebridge receives many requests from facilities and organizations around the Bay Area to provide training and classes. However, the Company has been unable to adequately serve this population because it has a limited number of available teachers, who mostly reside in the East Bay. By recruiting trainees from around the Bay Area, Stagebridge will have the potential to serve a much wider audience.

The Training Institute will expand and organize our current class offerings by providing comprehensive, sequential courses that include: acting (basic, advanced, scene study); improvisation (basic, advanced); storytelling (basic, advanced, storytelling for performance); and dance, voice, writing for theatre (comedy, playwriting). Taught by a staff of experienced professional artists, most classes will be ongoing and also include short term, weekend, and special single workshops taught by guest artists. The Training Institute will provide students a certificate for completing a specific curriculum of courses in acting, storytelling, dance, etc... .

In order to significantly extend theatre arts training to older adults throughout the San Francisco Bay Area, the Training Institute also will develop a certification program to train more professional teachers. This program will be geared to people with significant performing arts skills and background, primarily older adults (60+), but also some middle age adults (45+). A professional staff will train people to teach performing arts to older adults, including course work and practical internship. Students will observe teachers working in community settings, co-teach classes, and then teach classes with staff members observing. Finally, they will be assigned a class to teach on their own with periodic monitoring by the staff. On the successful completion of their work, they will be offered paid teaching jobs.

How the “Healthy Aging” Program Benefits the Target Population:

In the next 25 years, the number of people over the age of 60 will double—worldwide. Yet our culture has not caught up with the coming “age wave.” Attitudes towards older adults and the aging process are still stereotypic, largely negative, and, most often, laughable. The images we see in the media are crafted by a youth-oriented culture. And there are few opportunities for older adults to be determinants of popular culture, to be seen in realistic portraits of what it means to grow old, or to be included in the performing arts. The need for realistic and positive images of older adults is paramount, as evidenced in a recent study profiled in the NY Times October 5, 2006. Seniors who held positive images of aging actually lived an average of 8 years longer than others whose self images were more negative.

Groundbreaking new research carried out by the National Institute of Mental Health is also substantiating what those of us in the field have known for years—that creativity with older adults is not just a pleasant pastime, but actually helps people stay healthier. Older adults who participated in arts activities were more involved with others, less reliant on medication, experienced fewer falls, less depressed, and maintained greater overall morale.

If nursing students can begin to perceive their geriatric patients as vital individuals who deserve care and respect versus the more common perception of people at the end of their lives, we will have achieved our goal. We believe that there is no better way to bring this notion to health care professionals than through live theatre and storytelling with older adults.

Evaluation:

For the “See Me” project, the main evaluation tool is a written evaluation (that we have been using for two years) soliciting responses from the students immediately after the Stagebridge class and then again six months to a year after they’ve been working as health care professionals. Each session is also videotaped and the tape used to help evaluate the project. We hope to develop our training module based on feedback garnered during the evaluation process. For “Seniors Reaching Out” we get informal feedback from the activity directors and client response to our workshops/performances. We evaluate the “theatre training” program by videotaping student’s work and self evaluation/discussion with students.

Healthy Aging is a core program at Stagebridge that has a demonstrated positive impact in addressing the special creative needs of our burgeoning senior population. Funding from _____ would help us to sustain the program and begin developing a specific training module for “healthy aging” curriculums for eventual distribution to other training programs. We hope that our clear vision and demonstrated track record will give confidence to _____ that we merit your support for this important and timely program.

If you have any questions or would like to arrange a site visit to observe a Healthy Aging workshop with nursing students, please feel free to contact me (510) 444-4755 or at director@stagebridge.org. Thank you for your consideration of our request.

Sincerely,

Stuart Kandell, Ph.D.
Executive Director