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### Arts help seniors age gracefully

By Janet Kornblum, USA TODAY

SAN FRANCISCO — Retired tailor Edward Dillard, wearing a red cap and jeans he sewed by hand, rises from his chair, clears his throat and begins reciting Maya Angelou's poem *On Aging*.



Practice makes perfect: Willie B. Ervin, 85, sings along with other seniors. Professional artists help SeniorHealth residents embrace the arts.

By Jack Gruber, USA TODAY

"When you see me sitting quietly/ Like a sack left on the shelf/ Don't think I need your chattering/ I'm listening to myself," he reads. (**Related item:** [Photo gallery](#))

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His six classmates, ages 75 to 92, sitting in folding chairs and wheelchairs in the Fillmore SeniorHealth Center, nod in silent approval.

"Hold! Stop! Don't pity me!" he continues, pausing dramatically after each word.

"So," instructor Paul Finocchiaro asks when he's done, "you still got that harmonica at home?" Dillard reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls it out. He and Finocchiaro launch into a blues progression.

"That's great," Finocchiaro says. "Beautiful."

This isn't just your run-of-the-mill senior center music class. Finocchiaro, 51, is a professional musician and actor preparing students for a live performance, at which they will sing, play music and recite poetry.

Not all are as practiced as Dillard. Finocchiaro often prods students to speak louder, more slowly or with more dramatic flair.

But the goal isn't just to improve performances. It's to improve lives.

Several members of this class are participating in a national study of aging and creativity that examines whether creative pursuits can benefit people 65 and older. In groups in San Francisco, New York and Washington, D.C., they sing, write or create visual art for at least an hour a week in programs taught by professional musicians, artists and writers. Then they perform or display their work.

Researchers hoped participants would experience fewer health declines than seniors who didn't participate. And results from the first year of the Washington portion of the project, the first results in, have exceeded their expectations.

Participants not only maintained their health, but they actually improved it, says project director Gene Cohen, director of the Center on Aging, Health & Humanities at George Washington University.

The group of 75 older adults, average age 80, sing at least once a week in a choral

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group led by a professional conductor. Everyone in the study lives independently, whether in assisted-living communities or at home. Participants reported that they fell less often, needed fewer medications, felt less depressed and less lonely, and became more active than a comparison group of 75 seniors in similar health and living circumstances.

"It's extraordinary that they actually improved," Cohen says. More results will be available after the study, which is financed primarily by the National Endowment for the Arts, ends in late 2005.

The positive early results don't surprise those who have been working with seniors in the arts for years.

"People need a reason to live, and arts give you a sense of connection to life," says Susan Perlstein, who heads the New York portion of the study and is executive director of the National Center for Creative Aging/Elders Share the Arts in Brooklyn, N.Y. "They give you a passion; they give the skills. Just the artistic process itself is one in which you have to focus and concentrate on many levels."

Paula Terry, director of the Access-Ability office with the National Endowment for the Arts, spearheaded the project because she wanted data that would measure whether there was any scientific basis for what she's been hearing for years.

Artists who work with seniors tell her that older people's "depression goes away; they become healthier; they form all these new relationships and on and on."

She and others hope the project not only will encourage more arts participation among seniors but also that it will spur Congress to increase spending for programs such as these because health benefits can translate into saved health care dollars.

Since participating in the class, Dillard says he is more outgoing and talkative; classmate Jesse James, 75, a retired community organizer, says it has brought him out of his shell, too. "The idea of giving someone room for expression is great. It made me more vocal. I have a lot of stuff I kept inside me."

Success in the arts can build confidence and lead to success in other arenas, says Bruce Miller of the Memory and Aging Center at the University of California-San Francisco, who is not involved in the study.

"If they have potential in art, they have potential in science, they have potential in business, they have potential advising our governments," Miller says.

Just ask Walter Peach, who participates in an arts class across town. At age 80, he

says, he had never touched a brush before and had to be "dragged" to the first class.

But after going, "I felt so good about myself," says Peach, placing his right hand on his heart, his voice lilting higher.

He has done two paintings. "I'm really proud of them. I have an entirely different outlook on myself than I did. It increased my self-esteem so much."

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