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For Healthy Aging, a Late Act in the Footlights

By [TINA ROSENBERG](#)

What kind of old age will you have?

Many of us look forward to spending retirement expanding our world - traveling, trying what we never had time to do, taking classes that give us new knowledge and skills. These activities are not only desirable in themselves, they help us to live longer and healthier lives.

But they are not within everyone's reach. Absent money and a sense of possibilities, retirement can become more time to fill with television. "We see people without money, who had very hard lives, who are not aware of their own potential," said Maureen Kellen-Taylor, the chief operating officer of [EngAGE](#), a program in the Los Angeles area that provides arts and other classes for some 5,000 people - the vast majority of them low-income - living in senior apartment communities. "They just had to get through life, taking care of things, and the idea of following a dream was not on their radar screens."

That's why the Burbank Senior Artists Colony is remarkable. Opened in 2005, it is a mix of market-rate and low-income apartments. The building looks like an upscale hotel but is built for the arts, with studios, a video editing room, a theater and classrooms.

Residents may arrive with no previous artistic experience or skill as an artist - but artists they become. The theater group that Sally Connors participates in is working with a troupe in London, via Skype, to write and perform a soap opera. Walter Hurlburt shows his oil paintings - for sale - at the colony's periodic art exhibitions. Residents work with students from a nearby alternative high school to do improv theater, make claymation films and art from recycled items. Suzanne Knode wrote a short movie, "[Bandida](#)," about an elderly woman who takes the bus to rob a convenience store. Then the residents filmed it - and Ira Glass's "[This American Life](#)" television show filmed them - and submitted the film to the Sundance Film Festival. "A pistol, a plan, and sensible shoes," says the poster.

The Burbank colony is the showpiece of EngAGE, an organization started in 1997 by Tim Carpenter. He was working for a health care company that built primary care centers for senior citizens when he met John Huskey, a Los Angeles developer of affordable housing.

Carpenter and Huskey began to talk about how to combine what each of them was doing. They had originally contemplated establishing acute-care health centers in senior apartment buildings, but now had a different idea. "We live in a society that's very acute-care based - we wait till someone's sick," Carpenter said. "We decided to try to get people to take on healthy behaviors without having to go to the doctor."

Carpenter, who had a background in the arts, started in one of the complexes built by Huskey's company, Meta Housing, in Duarte in 1997, by teaching writing himself. The program soon expanded to more buildings. In 2005, the Burbank colony opened - the first one in which EngAGE had a say in the design.

EngAGE now brings arts training, wellness programs like an annual Senior Olympics, and computer and other classes to 27 senior apartment buildings in the Los Angeles area, and will add another eight over the next year, including two - in North Hollywood and Long Beach - that, like Burbank, will be designed for the arts. The NoHo Senior Artists Colony will open in October with a 77-seat professional theater in the lobby. Burbank and the Piedmont Senior Apartments in North Hollywood have a mix of market rate and subsidized apartments, but the other 25 are all for low-income seniors. Most of the residents are living on less than \$15,000 a year. They pay \$400 to \$800 a month for a one- or two-bedroom apartment.

The classes are demanding - no one is gluing macaroni to paper plates - and the teachers are pros, either laid-off schoolteachers or artists. The dance teacher at the Portofino Villas site in Pomona, for example, is Trina Parks, a dancer and actress who was the first seriously lethal and first African-American Bond girl - she played Thumper in "Diamonds Are Forever."

Carpenter calls this approach the opposite of the assisted-living model. Assisted living centers provide whatever medical care is needed. They usually have a great dining hall. There are buses to the mall and trips to see plays. "These are things that don't help people that much," Carpenter said.

Everyone knows that staying physically fit is important to remaining healthy in later years. (A good summary of the evidence is [here](#).) And we know that [mental fitness](#) is also crucial.

But certain strategies are better than others. "Doing Sudoku helps the part of the brain that does Sudoku," said Michael C. Patterson, who used to run the [Staying Sharp](#) program at AARP and now is a principal in MindRAMP, a company that advises institutions working with senior citizens on promoting brain health in aging. "You need to exercise the full brain."

And it has to be a serious exercise, Patterson says. "Part of the process is you set a goal for yourself, and did you achieve it?" he said. "Making potholders is not going to do the trick."

Creativity in aging is Patterson's business, of course, but the idea is amply supported by research. (The [National Center for Creative Aging](#) is a good place to start.) One of the best all-around exercises for older adults is doing theater. The researchers Helga and Tony Noice (she is a psychologist, he is an actor) gave nine 90-minute classes to a group of adults. Some did theater training, some trained in visual arts and another group did nothing. After four weeks, [the differences in cognitive function](#) were astonishing. The theater trainees scored nearly a 60 percent increase in problem-solving ability (with visual arts, that ability declined) and the gain was sustained. The Noices believe that theater is especially good for the brain because it requires engagement on many levels - emotional, physical and intellectual.

Not inconsequential: theater is fun and social, so people stick with it. Some of the visual arts students dropped out, but none of the actors did. "When you really get involved in a creative project, it's physical exercise, mental stimulation, socializing, your stress goes down and it's enjoyable - something you will do," said Patterson.

A study done at the University of Southern California found that more respondents in EngAGE programs reported that their health had improved in the past year, while in a control group, more people reported that their health had worsened. A study carried out by Century Housing, one of the top lenders to EngAGE's communities, put a dollar figure on the gains. In the program, it found, 25 percent fewer people than in comparable groups needed expensive interventions such as nursing care. The savings came to about \$9,000 per year per resident.

EngAGE gets its money in part through fund-raising, but two-thirds of its income comes as payments from the senior complexes where it works. These buildings, in turn, stay afloat mainly through federal tax credits for low-income housing, said Huskey. The program is highly competitive, and projects are more likely to win tax credits if they have a local financial contribution - for example, from the Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency, or from banks, which by law must invest in their communities, including in low-income areas.

EngAGE is an important selling point for these groups, Huskey said. "They would much rather have a project that has a better story of how it's affecting people's lives. They want to do well by doing good." Huskey said his company was approaching Charlotte, N.C., Austin, Tex., and Minneapolis about starting senior artist colonies in those cities. "What started out as self-serving desire to get a 15-minute head start on my competitors has become a great thing," Huskey said.

Sally Connors thinks so. She and her husband had five good years after his lung cancer diagnosis, and they used them to travel. After he died, Connors, a junior high science teacher, thought she would spend her time reading, walking and doing genealogical research. "I wouldn't be going out and doing things," she said. "I would be very bored."

But she had a daughter in Burbank, and one day they drove by the colony. "Why don't you live there, Mom?" her daughter said.

"I'm not an artist," Connors replied.

"But you could be," her daughter said.

That was five years ago. Since then, she has taken every single class EngAGE offers in the colony. She's been in every theater performance. She had dreamed as a teenager of singing with a band - now she sang "Sentimental Journey" and "Blue Moon" with a band at a Fourth of July celebration. She wrote a two-minute screenplay, cast it, directed it, produced it and showed it as part of a film festival in the building. She's part of the theater group working with their British counterparts, and mentors high school kids. She's studied drawing and acrylic, watercolor and oil painting.

At 78, she does yoga twice a week and works out with a personal trainer. "I would be a lot older than I am right now if I hadn't found this," she said. "Definitely older mentally. I have a friend I don't call anymore. For her everything is wrong - I can't do this because I'm too old. That would have been me."

"All those years I spent thinking: 'If I only knew then what I know now,'" said Suzanne Knode, who counts "Bandida" - her first writing ever, at 63 - as the start of a new life. "But I said, 'Wait a minute. I know *now* what I know now. And I'm still alive."

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Tina Rosenberg won a Pulitzer Prize for her book "[The Haunted Land: Facing Europe's Ghosts After Communism](#)." She is a former editorial writer for *The Times* and now a contributing writer for the paper's Sunday magazine. She is the author, most recently, of "[Join the Club: How Peer Pressure Can Transform the World](#)" and the World War spy story e-book "[D for Deception](#)."

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2. Nuts.