

## **LSTA Project Peer Evaluation**

### **Natural Resources: Mining the Knowledge and Talents of Older Adults**

#### **Project title**

Natural Resources: Mining the Knowledge and Talents of Older Adults

#### **Library**

Tualatin Public Library

#### **Staff**

Mala Vyas, Program Specialist - Older Adults

Abigail Elder, Library Director and Grant Administrator

#### **Evaluator**

Jane Salisbury, Multnomah County Library, Library Outreach Supervisor

#### **Summary of evaluation**

“Natural Resources: Mining the Knowledge and Talents of Older Adults” has sought to engage older adults, through community partnerships and programs at the library, to share their talents and to learn skills that will be useful as they age from midlife to older age. A few obstacles slowed the project at first: these were mostly political and organizational in nature, and outside the control of the Tualatin Public Library. Once these were cleared, progress was made: relationships were begun and fostered, programs were developed and presented, a skills inventory was built, and tools were devised to sustain the programs.

“Natural Resources” demonstrates that there is a wide range of talent among older adults, a thirst for learning and engagement and that the public library is an ideal connector and home for these people and this kind of project.

#### **Project Abstract**

*Natural Resources* seeks to tap older adults as a community resources in three areas: 1) to create an inventory of skills and talents of adults ages 50+ who are willing to lend their expertise to individuals and groups; 2) to provide intergenerational opportunities for learning by engaging adults to foster the love of reading in young children; and 3) to gather feedback about current library services and make changes to improve the library experience for older adults.

#### **Project Objectives**

In brief, from the grant application, the stated objectives are these:

1. Tap older adults as a community resource.
2. Create intergenerational opportunities for learning.
3. Direct services to active older adults.
4. Create tools to make this project sustainable and replicable.

## **Project method**

Building on a long partnership with the Juanita Pohl Center, the original plan was to work closely with their director, who was fully invested in the project, and was a Loaves and Fishes employee. However, a series of changes, including the departure of that director, and a different relationship among the Juanita Pohl Center, the City of Tualatin and Loaves and Fishes, had a negative effect on the ability to carry out the hoped-for partner programs. In addition, an MOU was required by the City of Tualatin to hire a short-term Program Specialist, which further delayed the beginning of the project.

However, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter, Program Specialist Mala Vyas was hired, and program planning and implementation began in earnest. With the support of Abigail Elder, Library Director and Grant Administrator, and partners such as the Geezer Gallery and the Oregon Health Authority, programs were offered in the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter. The Program Specialist and Grant Administrator planned programs that built on those partnerships, and that had both comfortable familiarity (tai chi, computer classes) and innovation (the skill inventory project). Publicity and recruiting was carried out through advertising, mailings and presentations in the community, as well as through personal outreach.

Outreach was also conducted through the Juanita Pohl Center (JPC), the VFW, volunteer fairs and the adults who volunteer at the Tualatin Elementary School to raise awareness of programs, and to begin to build the skills inventory.

With the extension to the grant, activities continue to be scheduled and carried out, and tools for sustainability are being developed by the Program Specialist.

## **Background and assumptions**

This project was built on demographic data and informed assumptions about older adults. First, Tualatin is a vibrant community that has grown from a small rural town to a busy suburb in a very few years. The library has been specifically designed as a “true community center” in both its spaces and its integration into city government. One of the linchpins of the project is an enduring and close link with the Juanita Pohl Center, which has been a center for Loaves and Fishes, as well as many other senior programs.

Second, demographics are undeniably skewing towards a growing population of older adults, both in the older cohort and the baby boom. As the grant proposal states, “18.8% of Washington County residents are ages 55 or older”. The age group 55-64 is projected to increase “most significantly” among all the age groups in Washington County, according to a report by Civic Technologies.

Third, as much research and discussion in the library world and elsewhere has revealed in recent years, older adults seek connection and community. In addition, older adults are much more active and healthier than previous generations, and in the case of the baby boom cohort, more civically engaged and demanding.

These facts and assumptions have informed the activities of the “Natural Resources” project. They contain challenges, perhaps the most significant of which is the fact that there are really two generations of older adults, which might be characterized roughly as 1) baby boomers and 2) their parents. Another way to describe them may be as adults in midlife and seniors. Labels can be both useful and distracting, but it is true that there are two generations at play here.

### **Project results: progress, activities and programs**

Several activities have been successfully carried out in the course of the grant year.

A **skill inventory** of older adults who have skills and talents and are willing to share them publicly has been compiled. Although the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter report states that 23 people have been recruited, by mid-May, there are 58 people listed in the inventory, which exceeds the grant goal of 50. Abigail states that they are “at various states of readiness” to present or consult, but this activity will be sustained with a course in public speaking, which will include some ways to connect with civic groups looking for speakers and consultants. Rather than a formally organized group, this is more in the nature of a resource to be called upon. Mala tells me that this recruiting has been done most successfully by personal outreach, in an array of ways. At the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> quarter, she is confident that nine adults are ready, that is, in possession of the public speaking skills, to make presentations, which is a very respectable number for a new project.

Mala also suggest that the TPL staff continue to recruit older adults for the skill inventory database as part of its outreach. The publicity materials are in place, and community partnerships give the library access to recruit.

**Intergenerational programs** have succeeded in good measure. The recruitment of Youth Technology Coaches who have carried out Intergenerational Computer Classes looks like it has been the most successful effort. Judging strictly from the photos in the flash reports provided by Mala, it looks like a mix of ages, all in that large “older adult” cohort. According to Mala, the teen coaches have been great, and the classes a success. An appealing balance has been achieved in the development of a Homework Help program, whereby adults tutor young people, from grades 2-12.

The “Groovin’ with the Grandkids” intergenerational storytime program seems to have been slower to get off the ground. I visited the first session, which was sparsely attended. Perhaps this depends on more creative targeting to grandparent caregivers, or at other venues where families gather. Programs like this can be slow

to build, even if they are very well-done, which the storytime I observed was. Some concerted effort will be needed to bring this up to the goal on page 1 of the grant proposal: “Approximately 30-50 children and parents will attend intergenerational storytimes.

**Direct services for active older adults** have been varied and successful. They include a 12-week course on creative aging through art and writing offered at the Juanita Pohl Center, in partnership with the Geezer Gallery, a Tai Chi series for older adults, emphasizing better balance, and the aforementioned computer classes.

“Books to Action”, a popular program pioneered at Multnomah County Library, and now replicated in a number of libraries across the country, was also tried at Tualatin. A book is read and discussed by a group, and then a related one-time volunteer project is carried out. It is an attempt at literary and civic engagement, and when it works, it’s very satisfying. This is a more difficult program to implement than it would seem at first blush. A lot of factors need to line up to make it work: willing volunteers, timing, a related book title, and a reasonably simple volunteer project that can be performed in one day.

After some valiant attempts, such as working with the new dog shelter in Tualatin, they have devised a new plan, over which they will have more control. Volunteers will read Life is Wonderful, an autobiographical account of learning to read at an advanced age, accompanied by a volunteer project called “Spruce Up the Library”, which is just what it sounds like: cleaning and brightening up the library in ways that the staff cannot get to.

A **webpage** on the library’s site has also been developed:

<http://www.tualatinoregon.gov/library/adults-50>

The website lists programs and events, such as those described above. It’s worth mentioning that the photo on the website defies the cliches of many such efforts to depict older adults: she is neither a silver-haired tennis player, nor a bespectacled grandmotherly stereotype! The website would benefit from the inclusion of more area resources and links to reputable organizations serving older adults, such as <http://www.transforminglifeafter50.org/> and <http://www.eldersinaction.org/> .

## **Project results: outputs**

By the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter:

- 62 people were served by project programs
- 37 programs, meetings or events were held
- 181 people attended programs, meetings or events

A notable increase came in the 5<sup>th</sup> quarter:

- 190 people served

- 99 programs, meetings or events held
- 657 people attended programs, meetings or events over the course of the grant project

One measure that was mentioned in the grant proposal was not actually carried out. The proposal says “Tualatin Library staff will track the number of library cards issued to adults age 55+ during the grant period and the number of items checked out by the same population.” Although it seems that the data might be available through Washington County Cooperative Library System, it has not been pursued per se. Abigail and Mala offer a couple of perspectives on this subject. One, according to library card data from Civic Technologies, this age group is already being served well, a typical situation for most public libraries. Two, though it was in the grant proposal, it was not a focus of the grant activities. Rather, in the time available, staff concentrated on outreach and programming, in order to build volunteer participation and audiences.

### **Project impact**

The grant proposal states eloquently, in a number of ways, the scope of the problem. The demographic change, the “silver tsunami”, is a given. There are less quantifiable, but no less real, issues. One is the desire of everyone, including older adults, to make a meaningful contribution to their community, to share and connect. Another is the need to close the gap between generations, to cure the stratification in our society, which isolates generations from each other. A third is to build on the strength in separate community organizations to solve these problems together.

“Natural Resources” has begun to address these problems. Because of the delay in the beginning, the changes at the Juanita Pohl Center, and the complexity of the issues, there is much work left to be done. It is heartening to see the plans for sustainability of the project, in activities that lie ahead, including these:

- A multi-part series on public speaking, targeted specifically to the people who have volunteered for the skills inventory
- Instituting lightning talks as an appealing and simple way to share the knowledge and experience of these people
- The planned creation of training manuals for the Homework Help program and the Intergenerational Computer classes “so that they can be sustained and replicated”
- The compilation and sharing of survey results from the survey promoted by the Program Specialist, here: [www.tualatinoregon.gov/library/webforms/library-survey-adults-50-and-over](http://www.tualatinoregon.gov/library/webforms/library-survey-adults-50-and-over)
- A continuing commitment to position the library as a “connector”, between community organizations and people whose lives can flourish when they become more engaged

## Lessons learned and suggestions

Interesting lessons were learned in the course of the project,, which fall in line with current thinking about these generations of older adults. Here are some of these lessons, and suggestions for continued action.

**Face-to-face conversation and relationship-building are essential.** Abigail commented, “I underestimated the importance of individually asking people to participate. Even asking a group of people wasn’t personal enough. ... I think it would have been more successful if we had determined some concrete needs...and then recruited people who would fit those needs...” In order to put that kind of time in, Mala suggested that a 32-hour position would have been more effective than the 24-hour position stipulated in the grant. In her words, “The extra hours would have given us more time to build those personal relationships especially given the short timelines of the grant (ten and a half months).”

**Active older adults are interested in different kinds of activities than the older cohort.** Abigail noted “Young-old adults are still very busy and working”, which doesn’t leave them the time, even though they do have the inclination to be involved in their community. Some simple, but innovative programming might appeal to both cohorts, such as a program of lightning talks, which are neither demanding to the speaker and the audience, nor traditionally connected with a particular age group.

**It is essential to find organizations with compatible partnership cultures.** Schools, for example, tend to be very difficult to get into, for a variety of reasons. The dog shelter in Tualatin proved to be, as well. The lesson may be that community organizations with a less focused and strict mission may be more open to making partnerships with the library. Entrenched or single-focus organization can be difficult to collaborate with.

**Navigating the difference between traditional “senior” audiences and active adults in midlife is an important skill.** As people live longer, this issue will persist. Trying to continue to break down stereotypes and offer innovative programming, without denying the realities of the changes that aging brings: these are the challenges ahead.

## Conclusions

In this evaluator’s experience, it is difficult to sustain programs and efforts directed at older adults, once grant funding ends, especially if they fall outside of the stereotypical kinds of offerings for seniors, such as book clubs and programs on health, genealogy and quilting, to name a few common subjects traditionally connected to aging. Explaining the need and the vision for such focused attention on this cohort is much more challenging than advocating for children’s services, for example. Community leaders, library leaders, and funders do not always see the benefit or the richness of

involving active older adults at this level. It sometimes seems that enlightenment may come too late to harness the energies of more of the baby boom generation.

In addition, Abigail Elder, the Library Director and Administrator of this grant, will be leaving Tualatin Public Library, along with Mala Vyas, the Program Specialist. Ideally, a new director and current program staff would be thoroughly educated about these efforts, with an emphasis on the fact that they need to be nurtured and built upon. I would strongly encourage the sharing of information about this project with new staff and community partners, in order that this good work may be sustained.

“Natural resources: Mining the knowledge and talents of older adults” has been a valuable project, carried out enthusiastically by Tualatin Public Library Staff, in the face of some significant challenges. They have built an interesting and realistic foundation from which to launch programming and outreach that will strengthen the connection between the older adults of their community and the riches of the library.

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