



CREATIVITY, COMMUNITY & HEALTH

BY KAREN DOWCETT

PHOTOGRAPHY LAUREN CLOUGH

“The arts build the community as the community builds the art.”

The Living Arts Institute’s mission is to strengthen community, health and well-being through social/civic and creative engagement. It fosters active involvement of people of all ages and backgrounds in creative formats to increase connectivity and fan the creative flame inherent in all of us.

The Living Arts Institute (LAI) is a Yarmouthport-based, non-profit organization that spans the Cape to bring arts and cultural programming to the community.

To amplify our shared human experience, The Living Arts Institute designs projects and events around topics that grow out of our history, culture and environment such as: youth and aging, the environment, seasonal cycles, and identity. Each theme culminates in a public event or stage performance, and reflects the journey it has taken with the community through various forums such as: a school residency, workshop, panel discussion of national leaders, and intergenerational projects. The projects leading to each event seek to enliven the values and themes within each topic.

The Institute’s process is layered and expresses a sense that something other than the concrete form inhabits their projects. This “other” becomes activated through what Dr. Joan Borysenko terms “felt sense,” which occurs when we resonate with the experience of connection.

The Living Arts Institute was proud to bring Dr. Borysenko, world renowned Harvard medical scientist, researcher and author, to the Cape as a keynote speaker on October 20th for their most recent panel discussion, **Re-Imagining Our Future: Women Living Well Beyond 50.**

LAI's intention is always to provide multiple formats to allow for deep dialogue and engagement to activate this "felt sense" through a chosen topic. For instance, to initiate the Living Arts Institute's current focus on age, aging and ageism, LAI launched the project with a performance/reading by Pat Carroll and Betsy Palmer. The project also incorporated masks and created actors (puppets). LAI created a series of "Walk and Talks," which began in the spring and spanned from Wellfleet to Bourne, and held an intergenerational book discussion of *Two Old Women* by



Velma Wallis. The springboard for the project, this book discussion was held at the Lighthouse Charter School in Orleans, and was followed by a mask and movement seminar.

It is not technique that distinguishes The Living Arts Institute, but rather the intention – active engagement through experience – as well as the community itself that makes the art. This is truly the art that qualifies the "living" and defines LAI's work.

LAI also considers current/emerging theory and paradigm shifting medical research to inform their chosen topic and programming. Again, the current *Two Old Women* project stands as an excellent example. There is now groundbreaking research about the aging process that paves the way for the creative engagement of seniors in the arts. It is heralded by the medical community as a powerful means to aging healthfully, for optimal health and a longer, active life. This recently released research, directly connecting elder health with creativity, is revolutionizing the field of medicine. New empirical data is moving "creativity" from the periphery of our lives and educational settings to the center of health and wellbeing.

In response to this data, LAI is dedicated to spearheading programming for the Cape Cod community inspiring the launch of their program, *Well Beyond 50*. As Dr. Borysenko noted:

"Sociological research indicates that 25 percent of the population are 'cultural creatives' who embody values of interconnectedness, concerns for children and the elderly, a desire to rebuild communities, an interest in spirituality and religious tolerance, and a profound ecological concern. Not surprisingly, mid-life and older women are at the core of this movement." Dr. Borysenko celebrates the program we are initiating – creating a powerful and proven way for living well into the future.

LAI's initiatives are cutting-edge and have drawn national visionary leaders in medicine, the arts, and creative aging to join their Board of Directors and Advisory Board. Local board members have recently been joined by Dr. Gene Cohen and Dr. Joan Borysenko.

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Front page photo and detail above: Giant Spirit Guides (created in community) and masked Ancient Bowl Carriers begin The Dance of 100 Women led by Master Mentor Ellen Kennedy. These elements, which opened LAI's recent panel discussion event, Re-Imagining our Future: Living Well Beyond 50 will be incorporated into the production of Two Old Women, premiering in 2008.

Helen Warren, MSed, MFA is a visionary artist and healer who founded The Creative Spiral through her powerful imagery and her facilitation of the creative process in retreats, workshops and personal creative journeys. Studies with Seneca Elder Grandmother Twyla Nitsch, medical intuitive Carolyn Myss, and training with Debra Koff-Chapin, founder of the Center for Touch Drawing, have provided a metaphysical basis for her work.

Helen's powerful original paintings were shown recently at the **Living Arts Institute** panel/performance, and she will be a Master Mentor for LAI's **Well Beyond 50** program in 2008. She



describes her creative process as a sacred container of energies present and guiding her toward the imagery. Over the past ten years, this imagery bears witness to her ever-deepening connection to the universal creative life source within us.

Creativity, Health & Aging

The *Creativity and Aging Study*, supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Institutes of Health, was the first of its kind—examining the impact of accessing the creative potential of older adults on their overall health and social functioning. The average age in this multi-site national study, which took place in Washington, DC; New York, NY; and San Francisco, CA was 80 years of age, with participants ranging in age from 65 to 103.

The 2-year study measured the impact of professionally conducted community-based cultural programs on the health care utilization, physical health, mental health and social activities of individuals 65 and older. Subjects were assigned to either an intervention (art) or comparison (usual activity) group. Results revealed positive effects on those in the art groups in relation to physical health, number of doctor visits, medication usage, depression, morale, loneliness, and activity level. These results reflect a positive impact of participatory art programs for older adults in this study relevant to health promotion, disease prevention, and a reduction of risk factors driving the need for long-term care.

Note: a savings of just 8 cents a day, extrapolated to this Medicare D (covering medication) eligible population (35 million older adults), comes to a billion dollars a year; a savings of one dollar a day would result in 12 billion dollars a year saved.

Gene D. Cohen, M.D., Ph.D., is the Director of the Center on Aging, Health & Humanities at George Washington University and is a Past President of the Gerontological Society of America. He has served as Acting Director of the National Institute on Aging at the National Institutes of Health, and was Chief of the Center on Aging at the National Institute of Mental Health. Dr. Cohen has authored more than 150 publications in the field of aging, including, most recently, The Mature Mind: The Positive Power of the Aging Brain. Dr. Cohen was the project director for the Creativity and Aging Study.

As this medical research is re-framing the medical model around aging, it gives all of us, youth to elders, reason to change the old assumptions we might hold about creativity. A longitudinal study – the first of its kind – was funded by the National Institutes of Health and the National Endowment for the Arts, under the direction of Gene Cohen, M.D., Ph.D. (LAI's spring keynote speaker). His study has shown that creative engagement improves mental and physical health, reduces pain, improves the immune system, and can delay the onset of Alzheimer's disease by five years. According to Dr. Cohen, the medical community now understands the mechanism through which this occurs: research has doc-

years, and is especially true for living well beyond 50. Even if the perception about creativity is that "I'm not," we can now re-imagine ourselves unimpeded by old limiting assumptions around the word "creative." The programs we bring forward enable people to jump in and engage at whatever age/stage. It offers participatory, fun, organic, social and creative experiences like **Sacred Circle Dance** (of Findhorn inspiration), inter-generational story mapping, mask making that becomes part of the show, and **Touch Drawing** (a therapeutic creative process). LAI is fortunate to now have several nationally recognized artists/teachers joining us as "master mentors" for the **Well Beyond 50** launch in January 2008.



L-R: Panelists *Carol Plotkin, Exec. Dir. of Behavioral Health Services, CCHC and Shirley Gomes, former Mass. State Rep. and LAI Board member. Keynote Speaker and LAI Board member Dr. Joan Borysenko, LAI Founder/Director Karen Dowcett and Dr. Suzanne Baer, Career Consultant and LAI Board member.*

umented the regenerative capacity inherent in the brain of those who are creatively engaged in later years. This creates a major shift in the field as a result, says Dr. Cohen. Billions of dollars nationally and millions locally can potentially be re-directed, based on the outcomes of such research, which ultimately benefits each of us.

One would readily agree that we need air and water quality for survival. Now we know that social and creative engagement is as vitally important to our health and wellbeing as the air we breathe and the water we drink. It is the secret essential ingredient in the recipe for living well at any age, childhood through adult

The time is now, the need is great, the medicine powerful. Creative engagement builds health. We invite the Cape Cod community to join LAI's vision and to creatively engage and co-create. The Living Arts Institute is launching **Well Beyond 50**, designed specifically from this body of research, to benefit us all. You'll move, make sounds, and bring voice and color to expression in new ways. You will join a growing river of people who now build their own health through creative engagement and, in turn, the health of the whole community. So break the old picture frame of "I'm not creative" and paint the whole room!



Living Art

BY BARBARA STAFFORD

For more information visit

www.thelivingartsinstitute.org
www.creativespiral.net
www.touchdrawing.com
www.gwumc.edu/cahh/about/cohen.htm
www.findhorn.org

About the author and founder of LAI:

Karen Dowcett holds degrees in Theatre Design and Educational Leadership and has been awarded by the Governor of Illinois and the Department of Correction for her integrated arts programming work. She has worked with Arun Gandhi (grandson of M.K. Gandhi) bringing non-violent programming utilizing the arts as a catalyst for change to Memphis and inner city Detroit. Most recently she received the Outstanding Achievement Award in Drama from University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth. Karen is devoted to the arts and community, breathing life and voice into both.

FRAMELESS, I DARE TO EXPLORE, INVENT, MOVE BEYOND MY SELF-IMPOSED LIMITATIONS.
 I CAN'T DANCE SHIFTS TO "I CAN."

I AM NOT AN ARTIST TO "I AM."

IN THAT MOMENT OF RECOGNITION, A HEALING RESPONSE IS TRIGGERED.

MY CREATIVE JUICES LITERALLY FLOW NOURISHING MY SOUL AND HEALING MY BODY.

EVEN MY CAPACITY TO LOVE DEEPENS; I TRUST INTUITION MORE.

AS I ALLOW THE ARTIST AS HEALER TO EXPRESS ITSELF MORE FULLY,

I LIVE MORE FULLY,

EXPRESSING TRUTH IN A BRUSHSTROKE,

LIBERATING SPIRIT IN PENNING A PERFECT PHRASE,

TRANSCENDING PAIN IN SURRENDER TO THE RHYTHM OF THE DANCE.

OUT OF THE INTELLECT AND INTO THE BODY,

FEELING RICHLY ALIVE, FREE AND FEARLESS,

I EXPLORE MY ARTIST SELF IN COMMUNITY,

STRENGTHENED TO GO FARTHER.

I AM ADVENTURING INTO THE UNKNOWN – THAT "BLANK CANVAS."

I PUSH THE MASS OF CLAY, TAKE THE FIRST STEP OF THE DANCE.

I MOVE THROUGH TO THE UNFRAMED IMMENSITY OF THE CREATIVE UNKNOWN.

I AM ALIVE AND FREE.