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Creativity
is good for
your mind
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Patrick Weber,
of Shoreview





Participating in creative activities — such as music, dance, poetry, painting and other visual arts — can help ages 55 and older boost joy, improve health, fight depression and delay dementia.

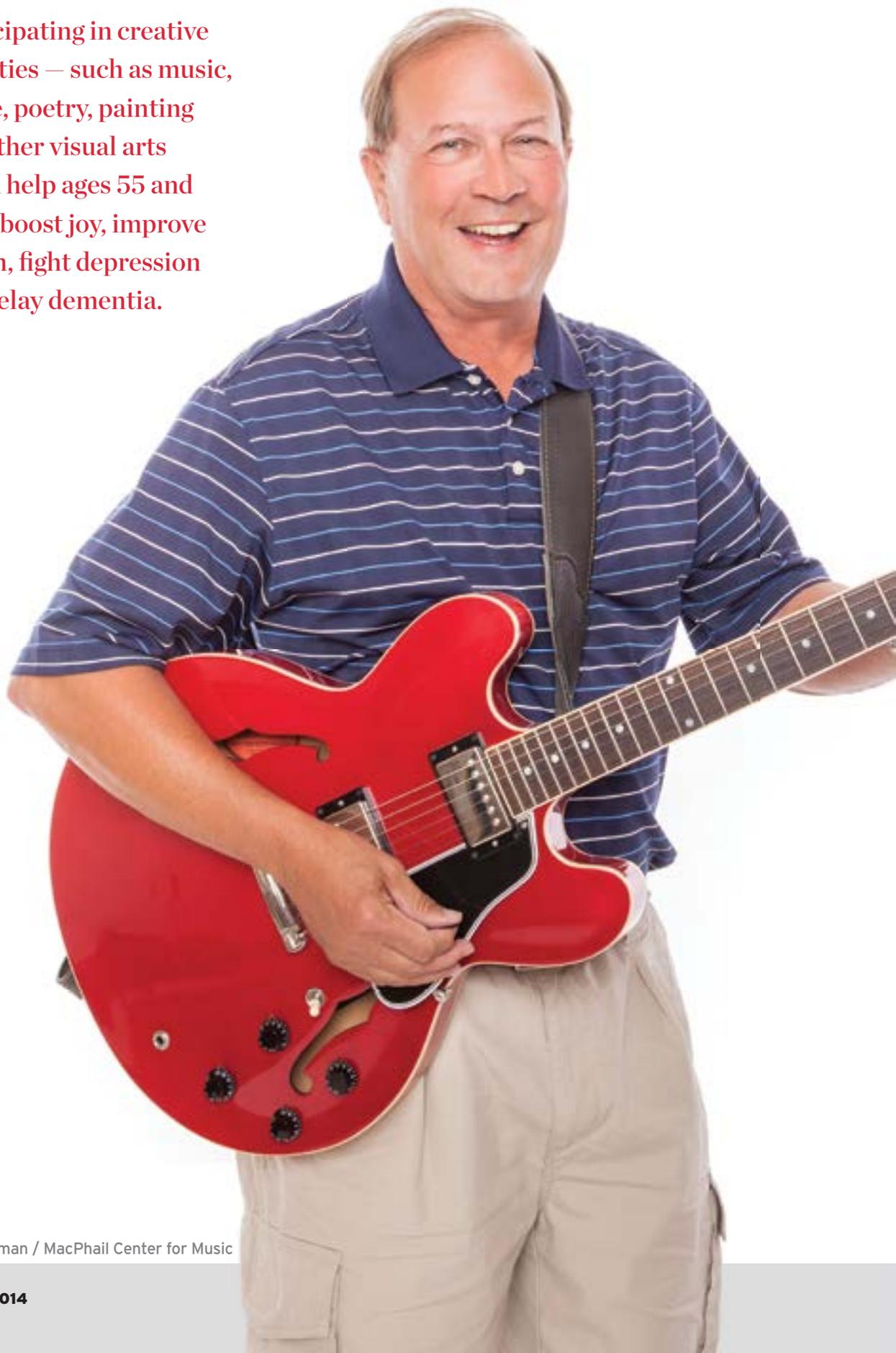


Photo by Rich Fleischman / MacPhail Center for Music

Arts and aging: *Amazing!*

BY SARAH DORISON



Retired attorney Patrick Weber dabbled in guitar as a youngster. Now, thanks to lessons through the Minneapolis-based MacPhail Center for Music, he's been back at it. The 63-year-old Shoreview resident has been playing since 2010 and now owns multiple electric guitars, including a cherry-red, semi-hollow-body Gibson ES-335.

Patrick Weber grew up in the 1960s, an exhilarating era that gave birth to The Beatles and The Rolling Stones. Attending middle school in Hibbing at the time, he was so inspired by the rock 'n' roll movement, he decided to take guitar lessons at a local music shop. "I bought my own guitar with money I had from a paper route," he said.

Guitar, however, wasn't easy to learn.

"I sold it when I was in my late 20s," Weber said. "I didn't play from that time forward."

Fast-forward about three decades.

Today Weber, a 63-year-old retired banking attorney living in Shoreview, has triumphantly reclaimed the guitar and is living his passion for music nearly every day.

He been playing guitar since 2010, thanks to weekly lessons at MacPhail Center of Music, based in Minneapolis, plus about five hours of practice a week. He boasts a repertoire of more than 30 songs, including *Give Me One Reason* by Tracy Chapman, *Wagon Wheel* by Darius Rucker and *Sweet Home Alabama* by Lynyrd Skynyrd.

"I thought it would be a good way to engage the brain," Weber said. "Plus, I just really enjoy music."

WHY IT REALLY MATTERS

Though Weber's story may sound like a tale of a man exploring a long-lost hobby later in life, experts who study aging say what Weber is doing is extremely important for his overall health.

Engaging the brain in challenging creative activities in midlife →



and beyond is an essential part of aging well, according to a growing group of neuroscientists.

Being active in the arts, according to recent studies, can delay dementia, fight depression and improve overall health (or at least slow its decline), even into our 80s.

Older adults who engage regularly in music, dance, poetry, painting and other visual arts have been proven to age better, mentally and physically, said Tammy Hauser, interim executive director for ArtSage, a connector, a convener and a catalyst for arts and aging in Minnesota (formerly called the Minnesota Creative Arts and Aging Network).

“Mastery of a skill forces your brain to make connections,” Hauser said, adding that the arts are especially powerful among the oldest of adults. “It’s more effective than a lot of medications.”

RESEARCH ON ARTS, AGING

Hauser has seen the arts change lives, but she’s also seen research that backs up the anecdotal evidence: According to a three-city study conducted by renowned

Above: Zoe Bird (left), director of the Alzheimer’s Poetry Project-Minnesota and ArtSage mentor and presenter Jeanne Bayer, take part in an artists training initiative developed and led by ArtSage, a Twin Cities-based organization that supports arts-and-aging programming in the Midwest.

geriatric psychiatrist Gene Cohen, George Washington University and the National Endowment for the Arts — *The Creativity and Aging Study* — arts-engaged older adults don’t just report better health outcomes. Participants in the three-year controlled study who were active in the arts (age 65 to 103 with an average age of 80) required fewer medications and doctor visits than the adults in the control group.

They also suffered fewer falls.

Why? Mastering artistic skills gave participants in the study a greater sense of control and also boosted their overall social engagement, according to the study, completed in 2006.

WATCH IT!

PBS/TPT produced a two-part documentary series, *Arts & the Mind*, featuring national and Minneapolis-based experts in the arts, hosted by Lisa Kudrow.

See pbs.org/program/arts-mind or tpt.org/artsandthemind.

In his book, *The Creative Age: Awakening Human Potential in the Second Half of Life*, Cohen argues that people involved in creative activities feel better, remain more independent and lead more meaningful lives.

USE IT OR LOSE IT

Weber doesn't need a research study to validate his reasons for playing guitar.

He sought out music partly to keep his brain active in retirement. After a lifetime of daily work in the intense world of finance and law, he wanted to stay not just busy, but sharp. He also exercises five times a week.

"I think to be engaged both mentally and physically is extremely important," Weber said.

Indeed, scientific evidence backs this use-it-or-lose-it philosophy.

In the PBS/TPT documentary *Arts & the Mind*, neuroscientist Dr. Jay Giedd with the National Institute of Mental Health cites the concept of neuroplasticity: Whether young or old, our brains' neural-pathways constantly adapt to our experiences, especially if the experiences are mentally and physically engaging, such as dancing, painting, singing or playing an instrument.

Opportunities to discover the arts

Alzheimer's Poetry Project-Minnesota, encourages the creativity of elders with memory loss through collaborative, joyful poetry programming. Contact director Zoe Bird at zozettebird@gmail.com or 612-432-9196; alzpoetry.org.

Beyond Ballroom Dance Company offers lifelong-learning opportunities for older adults; beyondballroom.org.

COMPAS, based in St. Paul, helps bring arts activities to all ages, including older adults in a variety of settings; compas.org.

History Theatre in St. Paul offers storytelling and writing workshops for senior living facilities and community centers. History Theatre also offers on-site writing classes for older adults; historytheatre.com.

Kairos Alive! is a Minneapolis-based performing and arts-learning organization offering award-winning intergenerational programming in participatory dance, music and story for older adults; kairosalive.org.

MacPhail Music for Life is a newly expanded program for adults 55 and older looking for a comfortable and inviting place to pursue music, including individual and group lessons; macphail.org.

Minneapolis Institute of Arts offers *Discover Your Story* tours designed for small groups of visitors with memory loss and their friends and caregivers; tinyurl.com/discoveryyourstory.

Music & Memory trains elder-care professionals how to set up personalized music playlists, delivered on iPods and other digital devices, for those in their care; musicandmemory.org.

Northern Clay Center offers Art@Hand courses for ages 55 and older and their families; northernclaycenter.org.

VocalEssence offers a variety of programs for older adults, including *Choral Pathways* and, coming in 2015, *Vintage Voices*, at senior centers and assisted living homes in the Twin Cities; vocalessence.org.



“The things that we do a lot, the brain will be optimized for those,” Giedd said in the documentary. “And the connections that we don’t use will wither and die.”

The same is true for young children, whose brains eliminate pathways that aren’t used through a process called competitive elimination, all part of adapting to life.

“It seems to be in place as long as we are alive,” Giedd said of the phenomenon of neuroplasticity. “There is no age too old to learn.”

SATISFYING THE SILVER TSUNAMI

This is all welcome news to anyone serving the baby boomer population, turning 65 at a rate of 10,000 people per day in the U.S., part of a worldwide demographic shift known as the Silver Tsunami.

In Minnesota, that means an estimated one-fifth of the state will be over age 65 by 2030.

Boomers — who are expected to live longer than previous generations — are looking for meaning and purpose not just in retirement but also in old age.

Hauser calls baby boomers “the younger old.”

“They want engaging experiences,” Hauser said. “They’re demanding that.”

Though many facilities are ill-equipped to fill the need for sophisticated creative opportunities, ArtSage is working to change that by training a growing cadre of artists who are interested in working with older adults.

Community centers, libraries and senior housing facilities can contact ArtSage to learn how to offer programming that appeals to a wide variety of older adults. Coming soon is SageConnect, an interactive and searchable database that will function as a one-stop shop for the arts and aging community.

Creating successful arts programming for older adults is a new and special challenge, Hauser said.

Artistic endeavors for boomers and beyond must go beyond traditional crafts.



Top: Teaching artist and mentor Joey Clark and artist May Lee-Yang participate in a training initiative organized by ArtSage, a catalyst for local arts-and-aging programming.

Bottom: Maria Genne works with older adults as part of her dance company, Kairos Alive!

Programming needs to be personal and tailored to individuals’ needs. Participants need venues for telling their own personal stories, Hauser said, adding: “There’s difference between (crafts) and writing a poem or creating a song and singing it.”

Personalized experiences, Hauser said, will go a long way to easing the feelings of loneliness, depression, loss and hopelessness that can come with aging.

Having a creative outlet can be especially beneficial for older adults, Hauser said. But younger boomers may find now to be an ideal time to start, especially couples whose children have left the nest.

“It’s a crucial piece of human development after age 55 when you’re trying to make meaning in your life,” Hauser said. “You have time. Maybe you didn’t have that early in your life. Maybe you’ve always wanted to draw or paint or sing. That’s what arts in aging celebrates.”

DANCE: ENGAGING THE BODY

Dance and movement can be particularly powerful for older adults, according to neuroscientist and pathologist Dr. Peter Davies at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York. He’s studied Alzheimer’s for more than 35 years.

Davies believes the richest, most resilient parts of the brain are the centers responsible for the arts.

When interviewed for *Arts & the Mind*, Davies said: “The evidence says that participation in dance programs reduces the development rate of dementia by maybe 75 percent. There is no drug around or even on the horizon that can reduce the rate of Alzheimer’s or dementia by 75 percent.”

Maria Genne, the founder of Kairos Alive! a dance company in Minneapolis, said dance — even when done by older adults able to do movements only while sitting — can be life changing.

Dance, she said, has the capacity to reconnect older adults through the powerful experience of movement, touch and social interaction.

“Dance is cognitive, it’s social, it’s emotional and it’s physical,” she said as part of her interview in *Arts & the Mind*. “Dance is a body-brain exercise.”

MINNESOTA LEADING THE WAY

Minnesota’s arts organizations — including the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, History Theatre, Northern Clay Center, VocalEssence, Beyond Ballroom Dance Company, the Alzheimer’s Poetry Project of Minnesota, MacPhail and Kairos Alive! — appear to be at the forefront of the arts-and-aging trend in the U.S.

“Nationally, Minnesota is the leader,” Hauser said. “We really are at the very beginning of this. We’re building a movement.”

Many local arts organizations attended the first Midwest Arts and Aging Conference in St. Paul earlier this year. Organized by ArtSage, the conference also featured dozens of individual artists (trained by ArtSage) to meet the arts-education demands of memory-care facilities, adult-day programs, independent housing facilities, community centers and beyond.

Gary Glazner, the founder of the national Alzheimer’s Poetry Project, gave Minnesota’s burgeoning arts-and-aging movement a pat on the back in his keynote address at the conference.

“You should be really proud of your community and the work you are doing together,” Glazner said. “It really is rich here. Not all places are like this.”

GETTING STARTED?

Not sure what *your* creative outlet should be? Just start exploring and see what you find.

Weber’s advice: Don’t pursue something you don’t love or something that’s too easy.

Look around until you find the right fit.

“Find out what makes you happy and go for it,” he said. “The good thing about being retired is you can do whatever you want.”

Sarah Dorison is the editor of Minnesota Good Age magazine.

RESOURCES

ArtSage offers training programs, consulting services and online resources to encourage creative arts experiences for older adults; artsagemn.org.

Creative Aging Toolkit for Public Libraries, creativeagingtoolkit.org

National Center for Creative Aging, creativeaging.org

Opening Doors, opendoorstomemory.org