

## CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

# Creative Environments that Revolutionize Aging

Nailah Jumoke always had the urge to write, but over time her life took other directions. When she moved to NoHo Senior Arts Colony in North Hollywood, California, her inner poet emerged and blossomed. Creativity thrives every day at NoHo through free arts education programs offered by the nonprofit organization EngAGE. Committed to the notion that later life is a launching pad, not a winding-down period, EngAGE challenges people to “take control of their own aging and believe they can do anything they want with the rest of their lives,” explains founder and executive director **Tim Carpenter**. That’s exactly what Jumoke and other NoHo residents are doing. “I’m finding out something about myself literally every day,” she says. Without EngAGE’s programs, “NoHo would be just another building. Instead, it really is a community.”

EngAGE provides sustainable arts, lifelong learning, and wellness programs for thousands of people who live in more than 35 apartment communities for low- to moderate-income seniors in Southern California. Four are arts-centered sites developed in partnership with Meta Housing Corporation: NoHo, senior arts colonies in Burbank and Long Beach, and family arts colonies in San Pedro and Glendale (opening in 2016). With a grant from Aroha Philanthropies, EngAGE has recently begun planning an expansion to Minneapolis–Saint Paul.

EngAGE’s program and business models—which align the assets and needs of arts education, older adults, and the affordable housing sector—improve outcomes for all, enrich older adults’ lives, and benefit communities. One in five Americans will be 65 or older by 2030, so the time is right for community arts education organizations to explore the potential for bringing programs like these into senior independent living communities. In this article, you will learn about the strategies that EngAGE has employed in order to align community resources as well as tools that your organization can use to build long-lasting relationships with older adults.

## How EngAGE Works

Carpenter is a vocal critic of our narrow social view of aging. He remembers his first encounter with a senior apartment community when he worked in senior healthcare earlier in his career: “They had two things on the calendar to look forward to every week. One was bingo, and the other was donuts.” “Aging is not a deficit,” he says, “and it’s not a problem.” By infusing senior housing with arts education and lifelong learning, EngAGE respects older adults’ desire for physical and emotional health, self-respect, self-sufficiency, community, and learning, aiming to change the way people age by changing the environments where they live. “When ‘art’ is written on the door of a senior housing community,” Carpenter says, “that is a very powerful inherent promise to the people who live there.”

EngAGE fulfills that promise with college-style courses—sequential and semester-long—provided at no cost to residents under contract with developers and building owners. Weekly assignments and rigorous critique challenge students. Culminating events or projects showcase their work—a poetry slam, a community art exhibition, a performance. According to chief operating officer **Maureen Kellen-Taylor**, staff and teaching artists honor the experiences of residents when designing

courses for each community: “We bring people together and ask them: What do you do now? How do you spend your time? What do you dream of doing? What would you like to share?” All communities have visual, literary, and performing arts classes. Arts education in senior arts colonies is more specialized: screenwriting, acting, poetry, chorus, comedic monologue, ceramics, and more. EngAGE hires and trains experienced professional teaching artists who excel at working with people with a variety of interests, abilities, and attention spans. The primarily part-time staff come from a variety of fields, including geriatrics, healthcare, housing, education, and the arts.

Residents in communities EngAGE serves have an average annual income of \$10,800. The average age is 77, and 80 percent are regular program participants. Resident satisfaction is high, leading to 95 percent occupancy rates, low turnover, long waiting lists, and a positive public image. The senior arts colonies that EngAGE develops with Meta Housing and its founder and CEO John Huskey are a unique concept. Their inaugural effort is the award-winning Burbank Senior Artists Colony, the first apartment rental community dedicated to providing a “creative, art-inspired environment” for senior independent living. EngAGE is not just a program vendor but an active partner, helping to design both the facilities and programs that attract residents and build community. Support services like these are incentives that enhance public-private partnership opportunities and make developers more competitive for federal Low-Income Housing Tax Credits. “If you look at what makes us stand out in the marketplace and why people recognize us as innovators,” Huskey says, “it’s not only that we build high-quality facilities. It’s that we never stop engaging our residents.”

## Learning from EngAGE

The EngAGE model works for a simple reason: It identifies and aligns the needs and assets of its partners and target market to create positive outcomes. This successful approach holds valuable lessons for community arts education organizations interested in reaching a growing audience of active older adults. This summary of assets, needs, and limitations is a guide:

- **Seniors** have time, experience, interest, and potential for learning. They need creative engagement, arts learning that contributes to well being, and social interaction. They may be challenged by health and mobility issues and by the sense of loss and uncertainty they may feel as they move to congregant housing for the first time in many decades.
- **Developers and building owners** with successful track records in senior housing can provide access to senior apartment communities as program sites, business and government relationships, and financial resources. They are looking for profitable opportunities that give them a competitive advantage. Enlightened developers or building owners like Huskey see beyond their profit margins to provide a high quality of life in their communities. But others may be unwilling or unable to do so. They may also have limited experience with nonprofit partnerships.

- **Community arts education organizations** have missions compatible with creative aging programs, experience in developing sequential programs, and access to skilled teaching artists. Experienced in arts and cross-sector partnerships, they have community connections in business, nonprofits, education, social services, and the arts. They need sustainable funding from sources beyond the limited pool of arts funders, access to populations interested in learning in the arts, and enhanced capacity to serve all age groups with varied programming. Their limitations include a tendency toward narrow thinking about who funds arts programs and little experience in working with senior housing. They often have small staffs, modest budgets, and limited risk capital.

Partial funding for EngAGE–Meta Housing projects has come from community development and housing agencies in Burbank, Glendale, Long Beach, and Los Angeles. Community arts education organizations are more likely to work with existing senior apartment complexes, but local government contacts can be helpful by providing information and access to those communities and information about funding through local agencies on aging. Non-profit aging services organizations are another potential resource. With their community connections and familiarity with the senior market, they can link organizations to needs and opportunities.

## Strategies for Exploring Senior Housing Partnerships

**Investigate options.** Talk to people in the aging services sector—government agencies and nonprofits—about senior housing services and needs in your area. Do you want to develop or adapt a program series and market it to one or more building owners or developers? Partner with other arts education organizations to develop and market a multidisciplinary program? Or build your own through a business relationship with a housing developer in which you design the environment, provide the programming, and develop related revenue streams (like the NoHo Senior Artist Colony’s onsite theater)? It’s likely that your organization will focus on the first two options, but think of the possibilities if you considered the third.

**Identify the right senior housing communities as prospective partners.** Arts education programs like those EngAGE offers are intended for active adults in independent living, not assisted living or long-term care facilities. Visit a few and talk to residents. Look for evidence of a place that’s alive, with people gathering in common areas, social interaction, and a diverse monthly activity calendar. Carpenter and Huskey both advocate working with a building owner or developer, not a management company or on-site staff. Narrow down some choices, and check their companies’ portfolios. Do they provide life-enhancing programs and services, or do they just build and lease developments that happen to be for seniors? The right person will connect business success with meeting social needs and understand that quality of life, not just physical amenities, sustains resident satisfaction. Contact a building owner or developer to pitch your idea. Carpenter convinced Huskey to offer a writing class as a marketing tool in one of his developments. It was a runaway success and became the impetus for EngAGE.

**Design programs around the older adult arts learner.** Uncover their expectations. Do they have a genuine interest in arts learning? What’s their experience level? Do they want structure, flexibility, or a combination? Ask what they can contribute: Do they have specific skills and talents to share? Find out what they want: Prompt them with examples, and ask what interests them most. Commit to ongoing program assessment. For EngAGE, assessment begins with knowing what the developer and business owner needs in order to demonstrate success. Consider the best way to collect data on health and

wellness impacts. With residents, focus on program evaluation and improvement, not teaching artist evaluation, a staff responsibility.

### Invest in advocacy and long-term relationship building.

Involve your board and staff in mining your organization’s current community connections and seek new ones, including local government economic and community development staff, social service organizations that work in the senior housing sector, potential business partners, and arts organization partners. Invite motivated partners and supporters to visit your organization and learn about what you do. Focus first on business partners who see the benefits quickly and are easy sells, but also cultivate new relationships to bring others along over time.

Inside the NoHo and Burbank artist colonies, a visitor can feel the creative energy in conversations with enthusiastic residents, in spacious, art-filled studios, and in lively classroom exchanges between teaching artists and students. “There’s so much genius around here,” Nailah Jumoke says. “At our age people think we’re ready to kick the bucket or ‘retire,’ whatever that means. I feel like I’m beginning to live.” The EngAGE model suggests an innovative creative aging opportunity for community arts education organizations: to be a creator, leader, expert, and advocate, not just a program provider, and to cultivate partners who build life-enhancing communities, not just shelter.

### Resources

EngAGE, [www.engagedaging.org](http://www.engagedaging.org)

Burbank Senior Artists Colony, [www.seniorartistscolony.com](http://www.seniorartistscolony.com)

Long Beach Senior Arts Colony, [www.lbseniorartscolony.com](http://www.lbseniorartscolony.com)

NoHo Senior Arts Colony, [www.nohoseniorartscolony.com](http://www.nohoseniorartscolony.com)

Meta Housing Corporation  
Building Engagement, <http://metahousing.com/building-engagement/>  
Senior Housing, <http://metahousing.com/senior-housing/>

### About the Author

**Ellen Hirzy** is an independent editor and writer for museums, arts and cultural organizations, and other nonprofits. She has worked with the National Guild on [Engaging Adolescents: Building Youth Participation in the Arts](#) and the Community Arts Education Resource Center.

