

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Carolyn Bottum, 781-259-8811

## ENHANCE YOUR WELL BEING WITH ART IN LATER LIFE

By Carolyn Bottum, Director, Council on Aging

Pursuing art after the age when most people retire will not only make your life more joyful, it could also make you healthier as well. It does not matter whether you are continuing a long-standing career or avocation or trying something new. Spending time writing, painting, dancing, sculpting, and anything else that flexes your creative muscles has proven benefits for your physical and emotional well being.

We all know the happy, satisfied feeling that comes from making something beautiful or from expressing some essential part of ourselves. Taking up an artistic pursuit later in life can be a great way to make retirement a time of renewal, of seeing the world in a different way. “Watercolor is self-expression and it is very satisfying for anyone who wishes to transfer their inner ideas into a visual image in watercolor,” says Jane Cooper, who teaches watercolor painting at the COA. “Sometimes, a painter comes to class saying, ‘Now I look at the scenery and I see familiar watercolors in the trees, the sky and landscape. That is a whole new experience for me.’”

Later life is often a time for both exploring our lives and contemplating what our lives mean. Artistic expression is a perfect vehicle for both. We have life experience, decades of accumulated skills, and, for many, finally the time for creative pursuits. We have important things to say and now the opportunity to say them. In addition, we may have come to a time when we care less whether what we make is perfect and more about whether our creations please us and clearly express our thoughts and ideas.

Connie Lewis, who leads a memoirs group at the COA, finds that later life is a great time to take up memoir-writing. “People often start thinking about writing their memoirs because their children or grandchildren want to hear about their lives. They come to the memoir group because they want to try out what they are writing in a supportive atmosphere. As they write and as they read what they have written, many find new and deeper meaning in their lives, and possibilities open up for new means of expression. Friendships also develop in the group because, I think, of the sharing of experience and the generosity of the participants.”

As Juliet Rago, both a visual artist who has taught classes at the COA and a member of the Memoirs group, says, “The memoir class at the COA has helped me greatly in expressing what I didn't know I could put into words. I've been given the confidence to explore with words what I could only feel. As an Artist I have always been able to put my feelings into visual form. Once I begin I enter a zone in which I am an instrument,

guided by something, some force that moves my hand. Writing is now for me another vehicle in which a similar phenomenon occurs. The guidance and constructive criticism of our instructor, Constance Lewis, and the encouragement and example of our fellow memoirists, along with our discussions make the class a stimulating and enjoyable experience. We have become sympathetic companions, fellow travelers, on this journey of memoir writing. I look forward with pleasure to each session.”

Research, especially that of Gene D. Cohen who helped redefine later life as a time of broadening horizons, has shown that being creative has statistically significant health benefits, as measured by fewer visits to the doctor, less increase in medication use, fewer falls, and better emotional health. Why might this be? Art creates a sense of mastery as we become more adept at our work and see how we are increasingly skillful. In addition, art offers an opportunity to be social when we gather in groups, or hold exhibits, or play music in a band or orchestra, or share our creativity in other ways. Practicing skills we have mastered has been shown to increase the effectiveness of our immune systems, while having a lively social life improves physical and mental well being in many, many ways including lowered blood pressure and stronger immune systems. And, of course, if you engage in dancing or other physical forms of art, you get exercise!

In addition, “new brain information says that if you learn something new that is difficult and you really focus on learning it, your brain actually renews itself and makes more connections,” says Claire Mount, who organizes five art exhibits at Bemis Hall each year. “Learning to write, draw, paint, etc. fits that pattern. Besides you meet new people, develop new interests and, therefore, are more interesting yourself. Keep learning! And Enjoy!”

The Lincoln Council on Aging offers many ways to be creative. We have watercolor classes, collage-making and bookmaking workshops, a memoirs writing group, tap dancing classes, and more. Every two months we have a new exhibit in our Lincoln Artist’s Gallery including a “Coffee with the Artist” reception.

For more information about current and future opportunities at the Lincoln Council on Aging, check out your monthly “News from Bemis Hall” or give us a call at 781-259-8811.