

SPOTLIGHT ON MUSEUM ED

This column explores innovative informal education projects being undertaken within our local museum community. As active spaces for dialogue, connection and critical thinking, it seeks to highlight programming that makes our institutions more inclusive and that encourage more meaningful engagement with our visitors.



Lifelong Learning - Seniors Programming in Museums

Sarah Carlson

We are living longer than ever before and as a result, our population is aging at an unprecedented rate - Canada's senior population (60 and older) is expected to rise to 31% by 2050.¹ As their numbers continue to grow, we have the ability as museum professionals to dedicate resources to provide meaningful experiences for seniors in our community. This can be achieved by offering programming that encourages social connectedness, which has been proven to have a positive impact on physical and mental health of seniors, including those suffering from the degenerative effects of aging.

Nearly 564,000 Canadians are currently living with dementia, a disorder that causes memory loss, problems with language and changes in mood or behaviour. With that number set to double in the next fifteen years, museums have the opportu-

nity to respond to this fast-growing trend. Shifting the focus from imparting knowledge to visitor engagement is crucial in providing specialized programming that takes into account the needs of those living with dementia. In recent years, there has been tremendous growth in museum programming throughout the United Kingdom and United States that caters to this audience. Several institutions have taken on a leadership role, pioneering programs and resources to support those affected by memory loss.

Pioneering Programs

Recognizing the diversity of its visitors' abilities and needs, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) began developing programming for people with dementia in 2006. The success of Meet Me at MoMA, a monthly interactive gallery-discussion program, led to the creation of the [MoMA Alzheimer's Project](#). This initiative resulted in the creation of

training resources and a program development model to help arts and health professionals make art accessible to people with dementia. Around the same time in the UK, National Museums Liverpool was developing [House of Memories](#), a comprehensive training program that equips caregivers with practical skills and resources to support those living with dementia. One of these resources is an [app](#) that provides a virtual platform for people living with dementia to explore objects from the collection and share memories. Other museums have followed suit and created seniors' programs of their own, including two institutions in our own province - the Surrey Museum and the Royal BC Museum.

Reminiscence at the Surrey Museum

The Surrey Museum's Reminiscence Kits were created to address a large

and ever-growing segment of the population that is unable to attend the museum programs and events in person. Focused on themes that range from celebrations to home life and vintage vacations, these outreach kits contain touchable artifacts, photographs and other ephemera that can be brought out into the community. Guided by a facilitator, artifacts are passed around one at a time and open-ended questions are asked to encourage conversations and get people to reflect and share their experiences and stories with the group. Research has shown the positive impact of utilizing different senses to help trigger memories with seniors suffering from memory loss so the kits include objects with different sounds, smells, tastes and textures that can evoke the senses.

New Learning at the Royal BC Museum

In addition to reminiscence, where objects are used to prompt the recollection of life stories, the Royal BC Museum has also been exploring an alternative approach in their seniors programming. On-site visits that focus on new learning encourage participants to use observation skills and discussion to figure out the purpose and function of mystery objects. Similar to the reminiscence approach, objects are passed around one at a time for participants to ob-

serve, describe and then work collaboratively to make connections and build on the ideas of others. Research conducted by [Kim Gough](#), Learning Program Developer at the Museum, has shown that constructing knowledge about something previously unknown increases their feelings of confidence and competence when actively interacting with objects.

Specialized programming developed at these two local institutions provides opportunities for seniors to socialize, which has been shown to improve their overall mood and well-being. If your institution is thinking about creating an on-site or outreach program that provides the opportunity for seniors to share, reflect, remember and connect, here are a few tips:

- Be aware your audience will have varying abilities
- Reach out to non-traditional partners (i.e. Alzheimer's societies) for support with resources and training
- Connect with seniors' facilities in your community to help with the development of programs
- Incorporate affective benchmarks (i.e. improved mood, socialization) when evaluating the success of your program

¹ Global Age Watch Index, 2015. <http://www.helpage.org/global-agewatch/reports/global-agewatch-index-2015-insight-report-summary-and-methodology/>

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Below: Seniors from The Glenshiel engage with artifacts at the Royal BC Museum.

Photo credit: Royal BC Museum

