

Rooted in Belonging: A Look Back at the 2022 Creative Aging Symposium

Front Porch Community Services recently announced its 6th annual Creative Aging Symposium, a gathering of artists and creative aging professionals celebrating different aspects of creative aging, will take place on Feb. 9, 2023. I have been lucky enough to attend the last three symposiums and am looking forward to attending my fourth.



Each symposium is unique and the 2022 event titled “Rooted in Belonging” was no exception. It continued the tradition of being an enlightening and mind opening experience.

One aspect of the symposium that I find the most exciting is that each speaker built upon the speaker before them. They find engaging ways to weave takeaways into their own talk until the symposium becomes a quilt of creative ideas around each event’s central theme.

For example, during the 2022 symposium, Calida Jones, a musician and vice president of Arts Consulting Group, laid the first stitch of this quilt with her opening remarks, which invited everyone into the conversation. She said that “Everyone is an artist. Everyone is creative. I think everyone has a gift.” She added that “I believe everyone has untapped potential. They simply need someone to activate it.”

I couldn’t help thinking that Calida was performing that elevation and celebration with her introduction, calling all of us present, to tap into our own creativity as we watch and listen to each speaker.

The Community Music Center’s work with community choirs around San Francisco directly relates to Calida’s comments on the importance of having someone who elevates and celebrates your art. Through the Community Music Center’s support, community choirs around the city are able to thrive. This is due in part to their choir directors, such as Robin Estrada, who introduced the Bayanihan Equity Center choir and how they practice using Zoom. An important aspect of their practice are daily check-ins as Robin explains, it’s “important to hear everyone ... because it creates a different sense of community.”

This sense of connection is clear in the videos of the choir singing that Robin shared with the group. Despite singing in different locations, the choir is able to come together and create harmonies over

distance.

Music as a sense of connection and belonging rang through into Tammy Hall's performance and conversation. A soul musician and composer who has played at Carnegie Hall and the Lincoln Center, Tammy began her talk with a performance of her piece "Sermon in Blue." She conveys so much emotion in her playing that it worked as the perfect scene setting before she discussed her personal history with music.

"I always say that music chose me," Tammy notes. "My mother played the piano [and] I was drawn to the piano right away."

I found that the collective experience of art was further built upon in the conversation between Front Porch Senior Director of Creative Development Katie Wade and visual artist Annabella Denisoff. Annabella began taking art classes in 2003 when she had partial vision and she continues to create art now that she is fully blind. She notes, "I don't see what I've done but I rely on someone else's imagination being an abstract painter. It is rewarding to hear what they can see." Annabella's art experience is a collective one.

Art and community was a central theme of Jessica McCracken's conversation with visual artist Christine Wong Yap and vocalist, Nancy Simpson. Jessica, the director of the Front Porch Community Services program Creative Spark, discussed how Christine created the "How I Keep Looking Up" project, which translated the personal passions of a group of older adults into a collection of flags that were flown in Times Square. This project, along with many that Christine creates, centers on belonging. "I think when you have a space of belonging that means you feel safe and accepted and able to be vulnerable, which allows you to take risks and taking risks is what allows you to grow," Christine said.



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Nancy Simpson participated in the project and her flag reflects the impact of music on her life. "Mine ended up being more of a piano keyboard with different rays of color coming out from it because in a way, playing the piano, singing, and music are my kind of therapy," Nancy notes.

Poet and producer Oshea Luja continued the focus on community by inviting everyone at the Symposium to participate in a breathing exercise that concluded with giving thanks for everyone who is creatively aging and sharing that moment together. Oshea created a sense of belonging that everyone present for the Symposium shared.

Oshea's talk weaved back in the influence of mothers, calling back to Tammy's discussion about her connection with her mother. Oshea's relationship with his mother helped him ground his sense of belonging. "My mother taught me the power of love. And love as I know it is the highest vibration. It exudes itself from itself similar to the sun and whoever is in its occurrence is truly alive," Oshea said. When Oshea asked his mother about her story, "it gave me the capacity to articulate the legacy," he said.

Legacy and connection anchored Encore.org Founder and CEO Marc Freedman's conversation with mental health activist Helen Abel. Encore.org fosters connections between different generations and the idea was born out of Marc's personal experience with older people. "I benefited repeatedly in my own life from connections with older people who took me underwing," he shared. "[They] made me feel like I was welcome and that made all the difference."

Marc has found that "naturally, as we get older, we're more inclined towards connection and it turns out happily that the skills that are so important for forging these bonds: empathy and emotional regulation, blossom as we get older so we are inclined toward relationships, connection, and belonging."

The conversation about legacy was an apt final stitch to complete the Symposium's quilt of ideas as the topics discussed and wisdom conveyed during the event have stuck with me even these months later. Each year, the Symposium reinforces for me the importance of creativity in living a full life and that the forms creativity can take in our lives are innumerable. We only have to look to see where it is already at root in our lives so we can give it the time and energy to flourish. I hope to see you all on February 9, 2023 for the 6th annual Symposium.

— *Kate Vermillion is Front Porch's manager of digital communications and social media.*

EDITOR'S NOTE: A full recording of the 2022 Creative Aging Symposium as well as recordings of our past Symposiums are available at <https://covia.org/programs/creative-aging-symposium/>.