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Putting a “SPARC” into the Lives of Bronx Seniors

(June 29, 2012 — Bronx) With support from the Department of Cultural Affairs, the Department for the Aging, and the National Endowment for the Arts, the Bronx Council on the Arts organized some of the borough’s finest artists to participate in *Seniors Partnering with Artists Citywide (SPARC)*. Through this program, eight talented Bronx artists were given the task of delivering arts programming to Bronx seniors. With many projects now completed, they have proven valuable in profound ways.

These artists have brought their creative skills to local senior centers — and with them, plenty of joy and excitement. “I became an artist yesterday,” said one woman at Sister Annunciata Bethel Senior Center. “When you came here and talked about arts and crafts and making masks, I got so excited that I couldn’t sleep that night!”

Some projects have tapped into the seniors’ memories and experiences in order to generate imagination, collaboration and impressive works of art. At Riverdale YM-YWHA, Theater Director **Yoni Oppenheim** is drawing upon old stories of home, family and war to rebuild the past. The seniors then perform improv scenes based on those stories. “Sharing stories about things like World War II and the home front is fun for them and keeps their minds sharp,” Oppenheim says. “It’s a good outlet for them to be creative, a forum to reflect, imagine and play.” Folkloric dancer **Milteri Tucker** took a similar approach of storytelling and improv at Casa Boricua Senior Center, but with an infusion of musical theater and dance. “The main theme I had them discuss and act out was ‘The Great Migration’ of Puerto Ricans to the US in the 1940s and 50s,” Tucker says. “They loved it and it was a great release for them. But the driving force remained bomba. In public events this June, my seniors acted out their memories, while my dancers danced to them.”

Bomba was also at the heart of the project that **Jose Ortiz**, aka “Dr. Drum,” led at BronxWorks Heights Senior Center. With the aid of traditional song, drumming and dance, the project elicited storytelling and open dialogue in a way that served as a valuable exchange of cultural history. Central to this history is bomba itself. “The project was designed to revive a cultural component that was almost erased from our history,” Ortiz says. “The stories were very interesting, especially hearing someone say that for the first time in their life, the milk for their coffee over-boiled because they were busy practicing bomba. This project made a tremendous impact!” Opera singer **Anna Tonna** is yet another SPARC artist who exercised minds via memory and music. To draw inspiration for concerts she performed for the seniors of Riverdale Senior Services, Tonna had discussions with them about popular music of their youth. These talks, she says, often digressed into history lessons. “They would mention music stars from past eras, like Woodie Guthrie and Sophie Tucker,” she says. “Then they would start to make connections to personal stories that covered all kinds of topics. Sometimes, they brought up things they hadn’t thought about in years.”

One final singing project, which stars the seniors themselves, is ongoing at Casa Boricua. **Jacqueline Flowers** has selected tunes to teach the participants, but she also encourages their own ideas. In the first session, the seniors did not disappoint her. “They lined up to sing bachata and ranchera,” Flowers says. “But they came so prepared with their own songs, and were so beautifully dressed, that I was touched and almost broke down into tears!” At PSS Highbridge Senior Center, **Zeretha Jenkins** was equally impressed by the seniors who, under her guidance, wrote an original play that was acted out in a public event. “Participants, whose talents ranged from acting, singing and dancing, were enthusiastic about learning, getting on stage and putting their best foot forward,” she says.

For painter and sculptor **Michael Ferris**, it was the cultivation of the creative process itself that mattered most in his project at JASA Van Cortlandt. In what, too, began as a revisit to the past, the project manifested in drawings of seniors’ old neighborhoods and evolved into the creation of self-portraits that nurtured expression and creative autonomy. “My method was to let their work lead the way,” Ferris says. “I let their work go in different directions, based on their feelings and personal experiences. A part of creativity is about not being self-conscious, and they learned how to do that.” At Sister Annunciata Bethel Senior Center, a chief goal of **Gail Sharbaan**’s arts and crafts project was simply to have a good time creating art. “To have seniors singing and giggling like kindergarteners made for a very light and fun session,” Sharbaan says. “And they really became engrossed in the activity. Sometimes it was even hard to get them out to lunch and stop working!”

Check the SPARC page of the Bronx Council on the Arts, www.bronxarts.org/sparc.asp, for highlights of completed projects and a schedule of remaining events that are open to all.

SPARC is a collaboration among the NYC Department of Cultural Affairs, the Department for the Aging and the City’s five local arts councils situated in each borough – Bronx Council on the Arts, Brooklyn Arts Council, Council on the Arts and Humanities of Staten Island, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council and Queens Council on the Arts. It was developed as part of Age-Friendly NYC, a citywide effort to make the City more livable for seniors, and previously ran as a successful pilot called Space for Art. The program is supported, in part, by funding from the National Endowment for the Arts.



SPARC Program Bronx artists bring their creative skills to local senior centers. Clockwise: Yoni Oppenheim, Milteri Tucker, Jose Ortiz, Anna Tonna, Jacqueline Flowers, Zeretha Jenkins, Michael Ferris, and Gail Sharbaan.