



CREATING A NEW OLD

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Let me begin this article by asking you a couple of questions;

What kind of world do you want to grow older in?

How do you want to grow older?

The reason I ask those questions is that there has never been a better time to be an older person in European society. We are living longer and the majority of us are living healthy lives in older age, lives that have opportunities for learning and taking part in the community. This is something to be celebrated and, of course, is an opportunity to imagine the future and be part of creating the vision for future generations. Ageing is something that happens to all of us so, let's plan for the world in which we will grow older and imagine the kind of older person you want to be.

During EY2012 the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity Between Generations there were many events to celebrate and highlight the benefits associated with active ageing. Active ageing is about making the best of our lives at each stage as we grow older and includes helping

ourselves to be as physically, mentally and emotionally well as possible.

The Year was also celebrating solidarity between generations and Member states highlighted the many ways in which intergenerational contact and solidarity is encouraged and maintained. A society that is age friendly is one that brings benefits to all ages.

We are currently witnessing significant changes to the make-up of society across the globe. Europe (as with other Western countries) has an ageing population and life expectancy is increasing. Recent demographic data show that the European population aged 65 years and over is growing, and will continue to grow for the next few decades.

According to the United Nations¹ one out of every nine people in the world is over 60 yrs of age (this is 810 million people). By 2050 people over 60 will outnumber the population of children (under 14) for the first time in human history and one out of every five people will be over 60 (over 2 billion people).

However, this demographic change is predominantly portrayed as a problem or a challenge i.e. how will society be able to afford the needs of a growing ageing population? The discourse on ageing is often confined to the costs of pensions and healthcare rather than the opportunities or bounty presented by an ageing population.

We posed the two questions above because we have a vision for the future where older people realise our full potential and participate fully in an inclusive society. These two questions are being faced by lots of us as we get older, particularly because many of the expectations and norms associated with older age no longer apply. For many of us older age is a time of opportunity in which we continue to grow and flourish rather than accepting the view that older people should passively retire and cease to live lives of autonomy.

As an organisation we focus on physical activity, learning and personal development and creativity as ways to facilitate active ageing. Our work in creativity led us to develop the Bealtaine festival – celebrating creativity as we age- which is now in its seventeenth year and is the largest cooperative festival in Ireland. This year we invited guests from all over Europe and beyond to a conference to consider how participation in the arts brings huge benefits to the ageing process. “Creating a New Old?” was an exciting and engaging three days of sharing good practice and networking.

For some people creative ageing has already become a strategy to age well and, consequently, recent years have seen pro-

jects and research that facilitate and address the impact of the arts on the health and wellbeing of older people from a broader perspective than the previously dominant problem-oriented approach to ageing.

Creativity has been characterised as a key factor in adaptation to ageing (Smith & Andersson, 1989)³, and as promoting resilience in older people (McFadden & Basting, 2010)⁴. Maintaining and widening activity levels as one ages was found to lessen some negatives associated with ageing like functional decline, and to help people adapt to the ‘fourth age’ (Silverstein & Parker, 2002)⁵.

Re-thinking how we regard ageing and older people will have a significant impact on policy making – in this instance arts/culture policies and policies on ageing. An international network, established and supported by Age & Opportunity will be a lead player in sharing and contributing to world-wide best practice, innovation and creativity.

We organised “Creating a new Old” to bring people together so that they could share ideas and use the conference as a platform to encourage collaboration. It was a huge success and delegates left the conference feeling inspired and energised. Many of them expressed a desire to stay in touch with us and each other, which in effect was the start of a European network.

If you are interested in being part of this network get in touch with me. We envisage this becoming a Europe-wide plat-

form of people (arts practitioners, teachers, people involved in delivering services to older people and policy makers) who share a vision for the future; making meaningful arts participation possible for older people in every society. You are invited to take part.

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¹ UN, 2012, Population Ageing & Development, 2012.

² See our website for more details; www.bealtaine.com

³ Smith, G.J., & Andersson, G. 1989. Creativity as a key factor in adaptation to old age. *Psychological Research Bulletin*. 1989. 29(7) p.24-28

⁴ McFadden, S., & Basting, A., 2010. Healthy Aging persons and their brains: promoting resilience through creative engagement. *Clinics in Geriatric Medicine*, 26, p.149-161

⁵ Silverstein, M., and Parker, M.G., 2002. 'Leisure Activities and Quality of Life Among the Oldest- Old in Sweden,' *Research on Aging*, Vol. 24, No 5. pp528-547

