

Lafayette Senior Center Residents and High School Teens Explore Aging and Belonging

Steinbeck: Social Critic and Ecologist: NEH 2018 Institute Project Proposal

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Lafayette Senior Center Residents and Area Teens Explore Aging and Belonging in Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men

This project promotes active aging through inter-generational reading, writing and art-making. In this yearlong effort, groups of high school students and the elderly will read, reflect, discuss and create written and visual pieces inspired by John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. A display of poems, memoirs and photos featuring their responses to aging, place and community will be showcased in a community celebration of International Day of Older Persons on October 1, 2019.

PROBLEM

Steinbeck and Ricketts demonstrated that every living unit is a unique whole, the parts of which “contribute to the structure and the functioning of the whole” (*Cortez* intro). An ardent social critic, Steinbeck gave voice to the poor, homeless, disabled, unemployed, foreign, and disadvantaged. One of the most invisible groups- the elderly- regularly appears in several of his works, including *Of Mice and Men*. Reading and discussing timely questions related to elderly populations invite consideration of aging and belonging. What happens when one is too old to work? What happens when place is lost? How is one's place in the community impacted when identity related to work and place have changed? Loss of community standing, limited inter-generational interactions, reduced involvement in activities to stimulate critical thinking impede healthy aging.

SOLUTION / PROJECT DESCRIPTION

A community program that invites teens and the elderly to interact and create in a meaningful way promotes healthy, active aging and strengthens a community where everyone “contribute[s] to the functioning of the whole.” There are three distinct stages of this program; each stage featuring different phases of groups of seniors and teens engaging in reading, writing, and art-making.

The first stage of this project involves reading. *Of Mice and Men* is not only an engaging, accessible novel- one of the featured minor characters, Candy, invites discussion of the place of the aged and their contribution to the structure and functioning of the whole. Copies of the novel and reflection journals will be offered to residents of Lafayette's senior centers. Over a six to eight week period, members of Carencro High's Big Books Club will visit the centers to read and discuss the book. Their visits will be supervised and guided by prepared discussion questions. Senior

center residents will be invited to reflect on the issues of aging and the importance of place in the novel. Students may facilitate the reflection by listening and recording responses or by responding to a passage written by a resident. Discussion questions and journal prompts are included in Appendix A.

The second writing stage will follow the community reading. Carencro High Creative Writing Club members, Lafayette High Academy of Medicine nursing students, and Acadiana Writing Project fellows will lead the senior center participants as they create memoirs and/or poems that examine aging, place and community- topics that have been explored in their *Of Mice and Men* readings and discussions. The teens participating in this section of the workshop will bring their passion for writing and a commitment to healthy aging. The workshops to be offered will suit the needs of the participants. Materials for two possible workshops are included in the Appendix B, including a link to the National Writing Project's *Poems as Maps* samples.

In the final stage of the project, teens will lead, using technology to create a display. Academy of Information Technology students may ask the senior center writers to sit for photo portraits, or they may create a photographic interpretation of their writings. Some students may select to respond to senior center participant writings or search for found poems in the pieces. AOIT students may find performance potential and work with senior center participants on audio recordings or perhaps two voice poems. I will offer the technology students several suggestions, and, of course, will be open to any extensions they can conceive- these are usually much more interesting than my own tech ideas. Appendix C includes suggested display ideas, instructions for poem forms that may work well, and performance suggestions.

A collection of these portraits, photo interpretations and writings will be featured in a large display celebrating the International Day of Older Persons on October 1. The Lafayette Public Library will be an excellent place to feature the display. Readings and/or audio by the senior center writers and their student partners would be a wonderful complement to the display.

INVOLVED GROUPS

Lafayette Rosehouse Senior Center
Lafayette Greenhouse Senior Center
Lafayette Senior Art Studio
Carencro High Big Books Club

Carencro High Creative Writers Club
Acadiana Writers Project
Academy of Information Technology
Students

DELIVERABLES

At the end of this project, the following material products will be created:

- A collection of writing pieces by senior center participants
- Student responses to senior participant writing
- Student portraits of senior participants
- Student photo interpretation of senior participant writing
- Audio recordings of performed senior works
- An anthology of these writings and photos

Additionally, the curated display at the public library, along with a shared reading can be photo documented and covered in the local newspaper.

TIMEFRAME

August - December 2018

Apply for grant funding.

Purchase novels and materials.

Obtain project approval from Lafayette senior centers and public library.

Prepare book club posters/postcards to promote reading event and make family members aware of the program.

Organize participating student and community groups.

Consult gerontology experts regarding discussion questions.

Prepare questions and journal prompts.

January - February 2019

Sign up senior center residents interested in participation in reading *Of Mice and Men*.

Schedule book club time at centers.

Work with Big Books Club readers and Lafayette High Health Academy students (future nurses). Topics will include working with the elderly and facilitating reading and discussion of *Of Mice and Men*.

March - April 2019

Distribute novels to senior center participants.

Schedule student volunteers to read and participate in discussions with senior care participants.

Complete book club reading, discussion and responding activities over six to eight weeks.

Use observation of reading stage to craft appropriate writing workshops for seniors.

April – May 2019

Finalize appropriate writing activities and models for senior care participants.
Hold workshops with Carencro Creative Writing Club and Acadiana Writing Project fellows about writing with senior center participants. (By this point, appropriate writing platforms should be evident.)
Find printer for anthology. (Donation?)

June – July 2019

Schedule and carry out writing workshops with senior center participants.
Prepare materials for proposed visual, textual and performance interpretations (to be offered to technology students),

August – September 2019

Guide Academy of Information Technology students as they prepare visual display of senior participant writings.
Contact Lafayette Public Library about display space and senior center readers/hosts.
Post flyers in community regarding International Day of Older Persons.
Schedule radio time / newspaper article advertising the display.

October 1

International Day of Older Persons event at Lafayette Public Library!

BUDGET

- \$400.00 – About 40 copies of *Of Mice and Men* (Audio available online. Use Soundcloud version featuring Sinese.)
- \$50.00 – Journals and pens for each senior center participant
- \$50.00 – Anthologies for each senior center participant

RISKS / ISSUES

This project requires funding, so if the grant award is not made, other avenues will need to be explored. Donors, such as the Jung Society, should be considered.

The biggest risk relates to the uncomfortable factor inherent in discussing aging, place and community with a population who has felt the negative impact. Therefore, the reading and discussions will need to be thoughtfully conducted. I plan to consult experts- probably gerontology social workers and nursing staff beforehand and seek their guidance in how discussions can bring forth voices that can facilitate healthy aging for all. An aging specialist will work with the teens before they participate in this project.

There may be sight or medical limitations or literacy issues among the senior center participants. Reading aloud or listening to an audio recording of the novel may be necessary. Similarly, some participants may not be able to write. In this case, students can act as recorders.

Sometimes students are unreliable, or have transportation/scheduling conflicts. They may volunteer to work at a center and not show. This is a chronic problem; it is important to motivate and support all volunteers. An alternative to face to face meetings may need to be devised- given the district prohibition on teacher/student transportation. One consideration may be to have the tech students set up Skype meetings.

SUCCESS CRITERIA

Every senior who reads *Of Mice and Men* – even just a chapter or a few pages- is making an effort to participate in a community. Every student who helps a senior participant with a reading or writing or who responds to a senior participant writing is engaging in an intergenerational relationship. Every visitor to the LPL who looks at the work that the senior participants and students have produced, every Lafayette resident who becomes aware of International Day of Older Persons is closer to thoughtful, healthy aging and “contribute to the structure and the functioning of the whole.”

If successful, this community read could be an annual event, featuring works that include the elderly, such as Steinbeck’s *The Red Pony*. This pioneer effort seeks to engage the community in an active aging conversation and can spark regular events.

Appendix A: Reading Resources
Of Mice and Men Discussion Questions
Of Mice and Men Journal Prompts
To be added in December 2018.

Appendix B: Writing Workshop Material

Memoirs that Consider Place

“I remember” Poetry Template

Nature Writing Workshop

National Writing Project Write Out: Place Poems

To be added in April 2019.

Appendix C: Artwork/Display Resources
Guidelines for visual interpretation of text
Two Voice poem Template
Found Poetry / Redacted Poetry Workshop
To be added August 2019.