



Arts & Health Project: Healthy Aging Through the Arts

<http://artsandhealth.ca/>

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“The Arts and Health Project was built on the understanding that all people are creative. We have unique knowledge and life experiences, and can benefit in many ways from a connection to the arts.”

jil p. weaving, Vancouver Board of Parks & Recreation

What is the project?

[Arts & Health \(A&H\)](#) supports seniors, particularly vulnerable seniors, to participate in “community-engaged” arts programming at community centres in the Vancouver area. The programs are led by professional artists, who work with a seniors’ programmer (or equivalent) at the community centre and the part-time Coordinator for the A&H program.

How did it get started and evolve over time?

Inspired by the work of Dr. Gene Cohen on Creativity and Aging, A&H was launched in 2006. Dr. Cohen’s study on Creativity and Aging found participation by seniors in arts-based programming, led by professional artists, was associated with improved overall health, decreased doctor visits and medication use, improved morale, decreased loneliness, and decreased number of falls.¹

Building a model based on Dr. Cohen’s research, Vancouver Coastal Health’s [SMART Fund Program](#)² and the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation partnered to develop and fund a three-year “incubator” project to work with professional artists in four different artistic disciplines. These artists collaborated with seniors in four different programs (and sites) in the Vancouver area:

- Strathcona Community Centre (East Vancouver): Puppetry and dance with Chinese speaking seniors
- Britannia Community Centre (East Vancouver): Writing and imaging with LGBTQ seniors (Quirk-e) (to find out more about this program, see the [Quirk-e Program Profile](#))
- Silver Harbour Senior’s Activity Centre (North Vancouver): Digital storytelling with seniors living independently in the community
- Renfrew Park Community Centre (East Vancouver): Painting and visual arts with community-dwelling and residential care seniors

At the end of the three years, both the artists and seniors were excited about what they had achieved and wanted the project to continue. An evaluation of the A&H (conducted with researchers from the University of British

¹ See Cohen G. D. , Perlstein S. , Chapline J. , Kelly J. , Firth K. M. , & Simmens S . (2006). The impact of professionally conducted cultural programs on the physical health, mental health, and social functioning of older adults. *The Gerontologist* , 46 , 726 -734.

² The SMART Fund or Sharon Martin Community Health Fund focuses on promoting health and wellness in marginalized populations including vulnerable seniors. Begun in 1997, this innovative program supports and funds non-profit agencies in the Vancouver Coastal Health geographic region to develop projects that empower communities to better identify and manage their own health and wellness needs.

Columbia) also showed very positive results. The researchers concluded that participation in the project gave seniors opportunities for social connection, a sense of dedication and hard work, increased self-esteem and confidence, and a feeling of accomplishment as artists. Project participation was associated with statistically significant improvements in self-perceived health, chronic pain, and sense of community.³

Based on both the positive evaluation results and enthusiasm from artists and participants, the Task Force⁴ (that acts in an advisory capacity for the project) decided to continue the A&H project past its incubator stage, and the four initial programs were extended. In addition, a new program, Express Your Voice choir, was added at the Roundhouse Community Centre (in Downtown Vancouver).

In 2012, looking to expand the project into new areas, A&H decided to “graduate” programs out of the main funding stream after three years. The goal was for these programs to secure their own funding while continuing to receive support from A&H for the non-financial aspects of the project (i.e., the artists’ community of practice and the annual exhibition and showcase). A&H started phasing out funding for individual programs (over a 2 to 3-year period) and worked with the programs on a transition plan that included identifying other funding opportunities and providing training in both grant writing and service provision to vulnerable seniors.

As a result of these changes four new groups were added in 2013:

- Moberly Arts & Cultural Centre (South Vancouver): Contemporary Dance with South Asian seniors
- Carnegie Community Centre (Downtown Eastside of Vancouver): Contemporary Dance
- Britannia Community Centre (East Vancouver): Aboriginal Arts Mentorship with urban Aboriginal Elders
- Tsleil-Waututh Nation (North Shore): Aboriginal Arts with Elders

What is the Current Programming Model?

In 2014, A&H began trying out a new delivery model. Instead of the three-year incubator funding model, they started transitioning over to 10-week courses offered three times a year (fall, winter, spring). The goal of this new model was to expand access to community-engaged arts programming by aligning A&H projects with community centres’ programming structures and cycles, and to develop a more sustainable model over the long term. 2016-17 was the first year where all A&H projects were being offered in this new model. To ensure everyone is able to participate for as long as they would like, participants are not limited to one program cycle and are encouraged to re-apply for subsequent terms.

An artist is assigned to work with each program site. The respective site community centre seniors’ programmer (or equivalent staff) and the part-time Coordinator for the A&H program provide additional support. New artists are supported by A&H with a formal three-hour training workshop, and a specialized curriculum guide was developed for new artists, programmers and other community centre staff to support them in learning how to facilitate community-engaged arts programming with seniors and Elders.

³ See Phinney, A., Moody, E., Pickersgill, M., Solorzano, J.G., Naylor, M., & Weaving, J. (2012). *The Arts, Health and Seniors Project*.

⁴ A&H’s Task Force provides strategic advice to the project and includes leaders from the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation and Vancouver Coastal Health SMART Fund who have been involved in the development and evolution of A&H over time.

Currently, there are approximately 175 participants in eight program sites, plus the two alumni programs that are funded independently (Quirk-e and the Strathcona Puppetry project). As part of a broader reach, many A&H projects put on public performances and/or have studio openings where participants and the artist share their creative processes. In addition, there is a week-long exhibition in June each year, where all the groups come together to share their work with each other and the public.

How is A&H Funded?

A&H receives funding from Vancouver Coastal Health and the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation, as well as financial contributions from participating sites (i.e. community centres). Program sites periodically receive grants from other funders in the health and culture sectors (BC Arts Council, the Vancouver Foundation, City of Vancouver- Cultural Services, and SMART One Time Only Funding). A&H is staffed by a part-time Coordinator, who works under the Arts, Culture and Engagement team at the Vancouver Park Board, and is responsible for supporting the existing programs and writing grants.

A&H provides different levels of funding and support for the programs, depending on their needs and the capacity of the sites. An average 10-week cycle might cost \$1,500 and would include expenses such as artist fees, cost of materials and language translation. Funding is provided depending on a number of factors including the cost of the program and whether external grants are available to support program delivery.

What are the key elements of success?

One of the keys to the success of A&H has been its ability to build relationships and trust with the program sites and participants, and the flexibility of the program model to meet the needs and context at the different sites. Each site is unique both in terms of the art form they are working with and the seniors who participate in the program.

A&H has a strong commitment to collaborative learning. More experienced artists and senior program staff mentor new artists and programmers, and both the artists and seniors' programmers are encouraged to take on greater leadership roles over time. With leadership from the artist who started the Quirk-e project, A&H has developed a variety of [formal learning materials](#) for community-engaged arts programs including a [Startup Guide](#), an [Administrative Practice Guide](#), and a [Peer Support Guide](#), as well as a new curriculum guide for the new 10-week program cycle. The development of these guides, as well as the formal curriculum, creates the opportunity for A&H to share their model with other communities in the Lower Mainland and across the province.

From the start of A&H, they have fostered a community of practice. Twice a year, artists and site staff engage in dialogue, peer learning and joint planning. Evaluation has been consistent practice in the program and A&H benefits from access to the SMART Fund evaluation tools.

A&H is entering a period of strategic planning to develop new funding and participation partners, grow project infrastructure and expand the programs. Due to limited funding, the A&H Coordinator only works part time, creating ongoing capacity challenges for the project. A&H is still investigating the impact of the change in program delivery model and this will come under review in the new Strategic Plan.