



Proposal to the Friends Foundation for the Aging

“Human connections are deeply nurtured in the field of shared story.” – Jean Houston

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

[99/100]

People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos respectfully requests **\$9,646.00** to provide two intergenerational literature reading and discussion programs with aging adults in Northwest Philadelphia and Drexel Medical Humanities students.

Social isolation and loneliness can lead to serious health problems for older adults. Roughly 43% of Philadelphians aged 65+ live alone and the population is aging rapidly. Social distancing and other efforts to stop the spread of COVID-19 continue to exacerbate these issues that are especially acute among older adults.

Our program utilizes oral readings of literary short stories and a unique discussion framework designed to empower participants and deepen relationships.

II. BRIEF HISTORY

[100/100]

Brief statement of organizational history and competence for this effort. Include description of the diversity of leadership staff, board and people served.

Our work began in 1972 when our founder, Sarah Hirschman, invited a group of Puerto Rican women to engage with their cultural heritage through literature. Sarah’s passion for stories and her deep commitment to equity and inclusion led her to develop a method that empowers individuals to engage fully and freely in literary discussions.

Today, we offer approximately 50 regional programs each year, with additional programs offered throughout DC Public Libraries and California’s state prisons. Our team reflects those we serve: Program coordinators are ethnically diverse, and several board members currently serve on outside DEI committees.

III. PROJECT DETAILS

[Maximum 5 pages]

Problem being Addressed

Evidence of needs, why this solution chosen/evidence, description of community and people to be served

According to a 2021 research report from the Philadelphia Corporation for Aging, 311,808 adults aged 60+ live in the city. Before the pandemic, 36% of Philadelphia's older adults were living alone and at risk of social isolation. Isolation increases risk of cognitive impairments, depression, and comorbidities, according to the National Institute on Aging.

There is a critical need to provide housing, services, and support to the rapidly aging population in Philadelphia. It is imperative to go beyond basic needs by providing a support network of programs that keep seniors mentally engaged, socially active, and inspired to pass on their hard-earned experiences.

For older adults, a classic *People & Stories* series offers new and vibrant social interaction, the opportunity to reflect with others on personal and shared experiences through the lens of literature, and the confidence that can be gained from rediscovering the value of one's own voice. This is just the type of immersive group arts experience that has been connected to positive health outcomes for seniors in research on creative aging (See <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/NEA-Creativity-and-Aging-Cohen-study.pdf>).

For medical students, *People & Stories* offers a service-based learning experience where they can listen to and learn from older adults—an experience that, according to Medical Humanities Program Coordinator Laura Mullin, they “wouldn’t have otherwise had the opportunity to do.” She goes on to say, “This program also gave our students a moment to realize that being future doctors isn't just how much of the basic sciences you can learn and memorize, but it's about human connection, conversation, listening to people's stories and being vulnerable with their own.” Students who engage in these activities are better equipped to address the social and emotional dimensions of disease in older adults once they graduate.

Action

What action will you do?

We will provide two, 8-week *People & Stories* program series (Spring & Fall, '22) for aging adults receiving UUH Outreach support services and students enrolled in Drexel University's medical humanities program. These series will utilize our *Crossing Borders* program model, which brings together members of diverse communities to engage in dialogues that cross racial, cultural, generational, and socioeconomic divides.

Each of the programs will follow the same format: For eight, 90-minute sessions, a coordinator and 15-20 participants will come together either in a space provided by the collaborating site, or in a virtual meeting space (Please see last page for our COVID-19 program policy). There, they will read and critically examine nuanced and enduring short stories. The coordinator, a literary scholar and trained discussion leader, will begin each session by introducing the story, giving some background on the author, and reading the story aloud. As they listen, the participants can read along with copies provided

by the coordinator. The oral reading is crucial to our method because it allows everyone--regardless of reading level or visual ability--to participate equally in the discussion.

After the reading, the coordinator will prompt a conversation based on the poetics, tensions, shadows, and themes present in the literature. This framework is bolstered by an exciting fifth category, life experience, which encourages participants to connect more deeply with the story. Coordinators are trained to prepare questions that encourage participants to analyze the language of the story, re-think their first impressions, and build on each other's responses.

The lively, structured dialogues that occur within our programs help individuals challenge their assumptions, communicate across cultural, class and ethnic differences and know first-hand the transformative power of literature. While discussing stories that grapple with loss, abandonment, racism, class privilege, domestic violence, dignity, friendship and love, participants confront their own stereotypes about the characters, each other, and themselves. The discussion dances between literature and life; one participant notes a startling image in a particular paragraph, and others in the room suggest ways of understanding it, based on their personal frames of reference, their knowledge of the world or their prior reading.

At the end of each series, participants receive a program certificate and an anthology of short stories to encourage future reading and life-long learning.

Partner Organizations

What other organizations will you partner with on this project?

People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos works in collaboration with community partners to enhance the services they offer their clients. We provide the literature program, story copies, binders, books, and the evaluation procedures, while the partner organization provides the space and the recruitment of the participants.

This project advances a recent collaboration between People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos and two Philadelphia-based partnering organizations:

- **UUH Outreach Program** (uuhoutreach.org)—A service organization that supports the healthy aging of Northwest Philadelphia seniors through a variety of professional and community services.
- **Drexel University College of Medicine, Medical Humanities Program** (drexel.edu/medicine/academics/md-program/additional-opportunities/medical-humanities/)—A program that equips medical students to respond to suffering, resolve ethical dilemmas, and address social dimensions of disease.

Outputs

What outputs (measurable, specific) do you expect?

This project involves the following outputs:

Activities

16 *People & Stories* sessions (1.5 hours each)

Participation

35-40 participants served

24 hours of structured literary dialogue	24-30 participants will attend at least 5 sessions
16 short stories read aloud; Copies of each distributed to 35-40 participants	Participants will: Discuss the story, listen to others, and share personal stories related to the text.
Coordinator facilitates structured dialogues based on the story presented each week	

Outcomes

What outcomes do you expect? What change will occur, what impact will it have?

Overall, People & Stories programs are an effective means to increase elderly participants’ well-being. Senior participants will often discover, or re-discover, the relevancy of literature to life during sessions that ignite vitality and intellectual stimulation through exciting discussion. Reading, debating, and examining literature opens doors to seeing the world with fresh eyes.

Our seminar-like workshops are sociable and enjoyable, yet also provide opportunities for participants to reflect on aspects within the text and discussions that are relevant to their lives. The level of engagement and stimulation the stories and discussions provide is particularly beneficial for seniors. A study conducted by Elderhostel, Inc., a non-profit leader in lifelong learning, determined the need for a nuanced approach to successful aging. The study finds the ideal way to age with vitality is through a “balanced program of brain exercise involving activities blending mental stimulation, social engagement, physical activity and creative expression.” Apart from physical activity, our senior participants engage in each component of brain exercise through reading literature, lively group discussion, and creative, critical thinking.

Likewise, in a study sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts, the late Dr. Gene D. Cohen found significant health-related benefits for seniors who participate in “creative fitness regimens,” such as poetry, art, music and dance programs. After a year, those participating in cultural programs reported “an increase in overall health,” as well as less depression, less loneliness and higher morale. Seniors whose psychosocial needs remain unmet are prone to higher psychological distress, a lower sense of control, lower self-rated health, and a smaller social network. This suggests that brain exercises - specifically those involving the arts and social interaction - play a significant role in seniors’ mental and physical health.

The interaction of the participants leads to new friendships and added depth to existing relationships, which are vital to seniors’ well-being and mental health. Furthermore, the literature becomes a means to open doors to new and imaginative landscapes, recharging older adults’ intellectual thinking. And, the opportunity to share one’s memories and stories supports health and well-being. As Barbara Stender, Coordinator of Senior Well-Being Programs of Greater Trenton Behavioral Health remarks: *“Surprising new evidence reveals that discussion programs for seniors are far more beneficial than we realized. Seniors need to talk for their mental health. They want to leave a legacy by telling their story.”*

How We Measure Success

How will you measure outputs and outcomes? Both quantitative and qualitative

To measure the success of the proposed project, we will draw data from a variety of evaluation tools, including participant surveys, partner site surveys and detailed coordinator reports. Quantitative data will derive from assessment tools developed in consultation with a team at Harvard University's Humanities and Liberal Arts and Assessment Lab (HULA), led by Dr. Danielle Allen. These evaluations capture participant impact data in five key outcome domains:

- Engagement (extent of involvement both with literature and with other participants)
- Literacy (elements of both basic and advanced literacy)
- Personal Development (self-esteem, well-being, authentic voice)
- Intersubjective Development (cultural context, perspective taking, communicative skills)
- Intellectual Development (critical and imaginative thinking, metacognition, practical judgement)

In addition to the Likert-scale survey, participants write candid responses to open-ended questions. Some of the open responses from senior participants in recent programs include: "This was my favorite thing to do on Zoom -- just a ray of light and connection each week."; "It's enriching life. This program is very important to us, intellectually and emotionally."; "The stimulation and the camaraderie are special moments in my week."; "People kept encouraging me to attend... it helped to lift up my spirits."

Coordinator narrative reports and partner site surveys provide key insights into the program's benefits, along with any issues and concerns that may have arisen during the series. Ms. Lillian LaSalle, Former E.D. of our long-standing Lawrence Senior Center program, shared the benefits she observed: "Most of our seniors love to read; most don't anymore because of poor vision or lack of access to literature. In People & Stories...the seniors experienced that their opinions and thoughts were valuable." She continued: "One woman, who seemed to have some memory loss, became active in the discussion and was very assertive in her responses...not in an aggressive way, but she was just letting us know that she had a different opinion, and she was able to express it and be respected for it. It was as if she were reclaiming something – perhaps her dignity!"

Project Sustainability

How will you sustain the project after the grant period?

We seek funding from a variety of federal, state, foundation and corporate grantmaking agencies to advance our mission and keep our programs running strong. Grant research is conducted year-round by our Grants Committee and new prospective funding sources are routinely considered and applied for.

Sharing & Replicating Results

How will your results be shared and replicated?

We share program results and other related news via our "Program Spotlight" e-mail blasts which are received by 800+ people. Our biannual newsletter *Word of Mouth*, now in its 20th volume, sheds further light on our programs while acknowledging all the funders and individual supporters who make them possible.

We will also contact Pennsylvania-based news sources, such as Pennsylvania's Department of Aging (PDA), and request that the project be featured in an upcoming edition of their newsletter, *Inside Aging*.

Our *Crossing Borders* program model has been honed and replicated for more than fifteen years. Following the success of our Spring '21 program with medical students and UUH seniors which was



funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, we are confident that the proposed project will produce desired and replicable results.

Shared Values

How does this project fit with Friends Foundation values?

This project is closely aligned with the Friends Foundation for the Aging's values and philosophy. Diversity, equity and inclusion are foundational principles and driving forces behind our mission. We begin with the belief that literature belongs to us all, including those of us who lack the capacity to read independently. We have a long track record of serving marginalized adults with limited opportunities and resources, including adults in prisons, re-entry and rehabilitation facilities, and homeless shelters, as well as at-risk youth and seniors in affordable housing.

Our simple and cost-effective program has been successfully adopted by many dozens of coordinators on local, regional, national and international levels. In 2020, the National Endowment for the Arts funded a strategic project that involves repackaging our methodology training workshop into a pay-for-service facilitator training experience for partner organization staff.

A program without walls, *People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos* relies on strong collaborative relationships to advance our mission. Program site partners allow us to meet participants where they are, often in difficult circumstances and far removed from public programming. Funding partners will sometimes suggest new program sites or project ideas, many of which have taken root and grown over the years. Though our program methodology and target audiences have remained firm, the agile nature of our work allows us to “break out of traditional molds of social service” and deliver programs wherever they are most needed, and where they are having the greatest impact.

Project Budget and Timeline

Include other sources of support and budget narrative

Ultimately, programs are scheduled in the days and weeks following an award notification. Program Coordinators at both UUH Outreach and Drexel's Medical Humanities Program, eager to advance this partnership, recently reiterated their commitment to serving a Spring and a Fall program series in 2022.

(Please see budget attachment)

COVID-19 Program Policy

People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos is committed to working with partner site staff to determine the most appropriate program model, based on safety and accessibility, for their clients and residents. If, at any point, federal or local public health guidelines recommend limiting or avoiding in-person gatherings, or if our program coordinators and/or program partners have additional health concerns, we will proceed with delivering the program(s) virtually. All core elements of our program, including the methodology, format, objectives, and outcome domains, are consistent between models, as are the associated costs.

Friends Foundation for the Aging Project Budget

Two, 8-week Crossing Borders programs (Spring/Fall 2022) serving UUH Seniors and Drexel Med Students

Item	Description	Cost / Program	Total Project Cost (2 Program Series)	Cost Share (In-Kind)	Request to the Friends Foundation for the Aging
Program Coordinator Stipends	8 sessions, \$150 per session	\$1,200.00	\$2,400.00	/	\$2,400.00
Direct Program Oversight	2% of Directors salary, \$63,000/year	\$1,260.00	\$2,520.00	/	\$2,520.00
Evaluation Assistant	Collection, tabulation and analysis, \$300/day x 1 day	\$300.00	\$600.00	/	\$600.00
Program Facilities Rental	8 sessions, \$200 per session	\$1,600.00	\$3,200.00	\$3,200.00	/
Program Site Staff	Publicity/recruitment, 1 Staff, \$200 per series	\$200.00	\$400.00	\$400.00	/
Participant Binders	20 binders, \$2.50 each	\$50.00	\$100.00	/	\$100.00
Participant Story Copies	8 stories/20 copies = approx. 5,000 sheets x \$.05/pg.	\$250.00	\$500.00	/	\$500.00
Participant Books	20 books, \$12/each	\$240.00	\$480.00	/	\$480.00
Certificates	Staples brand 110 lb. cardstock, 1 pack	\$17.00	\$34.00	/	\$34.00
Participant Evaluation Copies	8-pg. evaluation/20 copies = 160 sheets x \$.05/pg.	\$8.00	\$16.00	/	\$16.00
Shipping/handling (USPS)	2 Padded flat rate envelopes, \$8.55 each	\$17.00	\$34.00	/	\$34.00
Indirect Operating Expenses	Rent, Utilities, Travel and Training, etc., 2% of \$74,063	\$1,481.00	\$2,962.00	/	\$2,963.00

TOTAL: **\$6,623.00** **\$13,246.00** **\$3,600.00** **\$9,646.00**

Budget notes

* Costs per program are based on a full, 20-participant roster

* Each 8-week P&S/GyC series amounts to 2% of the ~50 programs we deliver annually

* Figures in Description column are exact; All other figures are rounded to nearest dollar