

ArtSpaces: Healthy Longevity through Creative Connections
Friends House Retirement Community, Inc.
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\$39,333 grant request

Summary Description

The **ArtSpaces** program aims to enhance the social engagement and general well-being of our diverse community of senior residents through participatory art. We have seen that creative projects, collectively pursued, markedly improve social well-being and mental and spiritual health. ArtSpaces, a program designed by artist leaders resident in Friends House independent living, will lead collaborative workshops – in, e.g., painting, ceramics, fabric art – as well as provide technical training and places for individual artists and woodworkers to pursue their individual goals. Together, we seek to share the arts as a way of expanding and deepening our community-building care for each other.

Proposal

The Friends House **ArtSpaces** program aims to enhance the social engagement and purposeful living of all the seniors in our community through the arts. Creative projects, collectively pursued, provide unique satisfactions for aging residents who too often tend to be isolated, depressed, or suffering from memory disorders. ArtSpaces is not just art therapy for hospital in-patients. It encourages self-expression for everyone, including those receiving nursing care, renting in our affordable housing building, and occupying the lodge and cottage neighborhoods. The creative arts program we are beginning to build can address some of the deepest social, emotional, and spiritual needs of all seniors. ArtSpaces is part of our commitment to healthy longevity and collaborative community through caring.

We propose to accommodate the creative and educational activities of resident artists, woodworkers, writers, fabric crafters, and all those seeking to experiment with artistic media, *first*, by repurposing two large, now-vacant, workrooms, *then* by filling them with collaborative creative activity. Friends House has not previously enjoyed shared workspaces of this kind. In these new ArtSpaces we will offer resident-led workshops, studio space, shop equipment, and training that will bring together people in all the neighborhoods of our retirement community. The activities planned for ArtSpaces are resident-led, and they will involve residents from all parts of our community. The benefits arising from being active in the arts will positively affect both those who are relatively infirm, in so many different ways, and the artist-leaders who seek to serve, for various reasons, through organizing ArtSpaces activities. Engaging with life through handwork and aesthetics is gratifying for everyone, teachers and students alike.

Background: After the traumatic isolations imposed by the coronavirus pandemic, the Friends House Residents Association has come back to life. New initiatives from the Friends House Arts Program and the Shop Committee, in particular, have begun to bring residents from

independent living, assisted living, and the nursing home together for creative workshops, exhibitions, and evening art talks. At the same time, the resident-designed “shadow boxes” in assisted living, undertaken at the behest of the Monarch Pathways Montessori memory care program, are still a topic of conversation and a means of personal identification. Further, we have been involved with two residents in health care neighborhoods who separately turned to making and sharing collage art as an explicit remedy for their increasing despair about being ill. One of them, now deceased at 94, persuaded activities staff in the nursing home to schedule an occasional collage workshop. For these events she personally collected materials for everyone to use, and she welcomed what she saw as a move away from “mere crafts” to “real art.”

These experiences remind us that ArtSpaces evolved in part from the efforts of the independent-living volunteers who worked on the memory care project; its leaders are committed to the Montessori idea of memory care integrated with many other forms of everyday preventive health and personalized therapeutic activity. Even more important, we remain attentive to the aesthetic desires of residents themselves as they age and, in some cases, experience increasing debility. ArtSpaces will not just bestow art works on people; rather we are seeking generative spaces that will bring out the artist in our friends and neighbors. Friends House Montessori-trained staff are fully supportive of this plan. Everyone now feels better poised to elicit creative energies from the residents they serve.

The creative initiatives already underway have had a real impact on quality of life at Friends House. After a recent art talk in conjunction with a solo exhibition, for example, we received the following email from a resident in our affordable housing apartment building:

All of you deserve a great round of applause and congratulations for a wonderful and enjoyable and educational program last night. I sat in complete awe of the whole program and feel happy with myself that I chose to live at Friends House for the winter of my life. I can't thank you enough for sharing your individual talents with us.

We have witnessed breakthrough moments for others, as well. A particularly touching moment was when a resident who had recently moved, unwillingly, to assisted living, gazing upon a wood sculpture by one of our artist leaders, forgot her resentment and laughed with pleasure at the whole exhibition. Other assisted living residents still draw the attention of visitors to their shadow boxes, one naming her five dogs pictured there and another affectionately recalling the person who gave her a butterfly image for her collage. There have always been artists at Friends House, but it is only recently that the arts program has reached out to residents in health care and connected them with larger numbers in independent living. ArtSpaces participants are gratified to see friends from all parts of our campus discovering the joys of art-making.

Problems and solutions: Friends House and all its residents and staff are committed to cultivating healthy longevity. The collective garden, thrift shop, library, flower-arranging for common spaces, exercise classes, weekly games – all these activities are managed by resident volunteers with support from management. But even within this “culture of volunteerism” we encounter problems of aging that prevent full and wholesome engagement for many. Physical disabilities, compromised cognition and memory, and isolation from family and friends continue to plague some residents. An appropriately housed and supported ArtSpaces program would draw in many who are presently not benefiting enough from medical and residential

care. Very often improved well-being results both from the lively social life we cultivate together and from opportunities to share our personal visions through creation.

The arts in particular seem to offer a special kind of memory care and social connection. Friends House, with its collaborative governance and culture of volunteerism and community service, is already innovative and unconventional. But a lively ArtSpaces program would open new channels of self-expression while providing the satisfactions of personal achievement. Everyone ages differently, and wellness is best cultivated person-to-person. Art workshops run by friends and neighbors in supportive spaces transform the experience of aging.

Timeline: The project will advance in stages over 12 months. Friends House will first use FFA funding to repurpose and renovate two sites in our main building, an art studio/teaching lab and a woodworking shop. Management is currently consulting participants in the design and equipping of these spaces, and hopes to issue contracts for an architect and contractors.

Stage 2 will transfer arts programs into the new spaces and expand activities. Workshop leaders and resident woodworkers (there are many) can begin scheduling facility use and convene regular teaching and experimentation workshops in the two spaces. It is hoped that also in Stage 2 a student intern can be hired to serve as studio manager. This individual will manage supplies, schedule activities, assist at events, and keep records for program evaluation purposes. A third stage will develop after the initial year. We hope to present the ArtSpaces model to other organizations concerned with healthy longevity while showcasing the results of our collaborative creative work.

Feasibility: We have no doubts about the feasibility of this plan. The spaces are available, Friends House has much experience in renovations, all parties to this proposal are warmly committed to the project. Our volunteer leadership is effective, and many residents are anxious to sign up for workshops and exhibit their work. The Arts Program and Woodshop Committees of the Seniors Association will record usage to report frequency of and attendance in workshops, exhibitions, art talks, field trips, etc. Activities staff in Health Care, occupational therapists, and the Seniors Association itself will monitor the increasing mobility, responsiveness, and engagement of residents who have struggled with memory, sensory decline, and loneliness. Independent living residents will be asked to write evaluations of programs from time to time for use in reporting.

It is unusual to apply for outside funding for a physical space renovation project, we realize. But ArtSpaces is much more than two new studios. The heart of the project is the volunteer teaching and sharing efforts of artists and craftspeople who live in our community. These leaders have thus far enriched our aesthetic life at no cost either to Friends House Retirement Community or to its low and middle-income retired residents. However, Friends House's maintenance budget is completely committed to keeping our physical plant safe and healthy, especially in health care areas. We need to find additional support to create a suitable built environment for ArtSpaces.

Metrics for evaluation: There are about 200 households in Friends House independent living, with a wide range of housing types, from subsidized rental apartments to duplex cottages with entrance fees and market-rate monthly charges. Health care housing includes 15-20 residents in assisted living and 60-plus residents in long-term care. Now that Covid-related restrictions are less constraining, Friends House administration is working to re-

integrate the nursing home with the independent living community. The arts program helps: it has offered three painting and ceramics workshops in skilled nursing areas, each with about ten active participants. Three to five residents in assisted living have attended, alongside independent living residents, the larger workshops that have been offered in the last six months. These activities must restrict enrollment to 20 participants due to space limitations, and they are always fully enrolled. With ArtSpaces, participation will grow significantly, reaching a much larger percentage of the community.

If ArtSpaces receives the needed funding, we expect that artist-leaders will be able to offer an average of three participatory workshops per month (20 registered participants each) and mount a new exhibit of resident artwork every two to three months. Show openings are usually attended by residents and members of the surrounding community. Individual artists will store their materials in the new ArtSpaces and work there at times when courses, workshops, and art talks are not scheduled.

Budget

Item	Total Cost	Requested from FFA	Major Donors and additional Foundations
New Equipment	\$10,111	\$4,111	\$6,000
Supplies	\$2,222	\$2,222	
Intern stipend for one year	\$14,000	\$13,000	\$1,000
Art Studio Re-purposing	\$23,000	\$10,000	13,000
Woodworking Studio Re-purposing	\$25,000	\$10,000	15,000
Total	74,333	\$39,333	\$35,000

Friends House is grateful for the past partnerships with Friends Foundation for the Aging. We look forward to partnering again with FFA to make ArtSpaces a reality.