Humanities

"Don't Cold-Water the Old People"

"I've lived through more history than I care to remember, but I've never had a chance to stop and think about it. Now I am beginning to understand how history has affected me and my family—and the little role I've played in it, too." That comment was made by one of the nearly 5,000 older people now participating in the Senior Center Humanities Program. Through the senior center network and its links to community resources the program is taking place in senior centers, public libraries, nursing homes and nutrition sites, unions, churches, community colleges, and other settings offering services for the elderly.

Since 1976, when a Division of Public Programs grant was made to the National Council on the Aging, the program has grown to include over 300 discussion groups in 41 states from Hawaii to Maine. In eight-week guided sessions—offered free to both centers and participants—selections from literature, poetry, drama and history are considered. Related visits to community museums, art galleries, historic landmarks, and wilderness areas are a part of the exploration of topics such as local and family history, attitudes toward aging, and the relationship between people and the land. Participants are discovering the joy of sharing their own life experiences, and are, in many cases, finding that their knowledge contributes to others' understanding of history. "I didn't realize that anyone else cared what happened in my life," said a California center member. "But now my recollections are being used by the local historical society as part of the history of my town."

In Gulfport, Mississippi, a community destroyed by a hurricane, the historical society director echoed that thought, saying: "Our history is locked inside the older people's heads. We want them to give us back our past." In Cincinnati both school children and scholars are interviewing center members, recognizing that their memories are resources, that they can supply missing information about the community, and about life and values in the early years of the century.

Many people involved in the program never before knew what the term "humanities" meant, but through their discussions and the formulation of their opinions they have themselves brought the humanities to life. As Ronald Alvarez, the project director, says, "In their ways, they have given the term a new and dynamic definition."

In most cases, discussion leaders are entering senior centers and the service of older persons for the first time ever through their involvement with the program. There is no financial compensation for these people, who are recruited locally among both employed and retired professors, teachers, and journalists, as well as other interested people such as housewives, museum curators, librarians, graduate students, and community leaders. For them, the rewards of working with the program are not monetary, but are, nonetheless, real: satisfaction in having stimulated interest where there was none; from knowledge acquired; from experiences shared. As one leader explained, "I never let them think of me as a teacher.

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We are in the course together, and that has really opened things up for discussion. I'm learning as much as they are."

The benefits derived from the program touch every segment of the communities in which it is offered. High school and elementary students listen as their elders impart a perspective on history that cannot be gained from books. Museums gain informed docents. Libraries gain aides. Universities and colleges gain guest lecturers—experts in such diverse areas as neighborhood lore; the importance of food, work, or traditions as a way of preserving ethnic identity; the background and skills of early twentieth century artisans. These results of the project—hoped for, but not considered a "sure bet"—are evidence of the wisdom of the program's central goals: to increase contributions to community life by older persons; and to increase community recognition of those contributions.

Although it is difficult to describe a typical participant, some things are known about those who join. The average participant is over 70; many read more than three books a month even though formal education for most stopped at less than the eighth grade. For most the NCOA program is the first formal educational experience in more than half a century. Large numbers of persons who cannot read have also been drawn into the program through the use of cassette recordings of unit readings. A Spanish-language edition of the study unit on aging, to be available this spring, will enable senior centers serving Hispanic populations to fully participate in the program.

Careful testing and development of materials has been accomplished by Alvarez and his associate, Susan Calhoun Kline, with the help of an advisory committee of distinguished scholars, older people, and senior center leaders. The resources of the National American Studies Faculty, a group of volunteer specialists, and the initiative and ideas brought to the project by senior centers have helped to create a project that is reaching people who, for the most part, have been overlooked or ignored by educators and humanists: the low- and middle-income, frail and often handicapped, minority elderly living in relative isolation and poverty. The project recognizes that the intellectual, social, psychological and educational needs of the aging are just as real and as critical as physical needs. As one participant, paraphrasing the Bible, said: "There's more to life than meat, and more to the body's needs than clothes."

Experience at a center in Colorado Springs is a good indication that that opinion is shared by others. There, frail elderly from a local nursing home have joined those in good health to discuss such writings as *Personal Geography,* by Newberry Prize-winning author Elizabeth Coatsworth; "The Little Shoemakers," by I. B. Singer; and "Terminus," by Emerson. As the center director says: "It's tough to turn them away. When twenty people enroll, thirty people show up for the second session, and more in the third, you know you've really touched a chord. So we started another group." There are now more than 60 people participating, including those from the nursing home. And the Pierce County Library system in Tacoma, Wash-

ington, which placed the readings on remote access telephone for individual use by the "elderly, blind, disabled, shut-in and hospitalized," has reached over 100 callers a day from the isolated rural elderly they serve.

One reason the project is working with people from all social and economic groups, and in both rural and urban settings, is that flexibility was built into the program. Discussion leaders are urged to follow a unit's general direction, and are given suggestions about supplementary activities and readings in a guide prepared for their use. But they are free to improvise, to follow where imagination and group sensitivity lead.

In thinking about a program that is affecting people in often personal and touching ways, the risks that were taken when NEH and NCOA began their cooperation several years ago are not easily apparent. At the time, a Harris poll commissioned by NCOA suggested that less than one percent of the elderly was interested in cultural and educational programs. Senior center directors, typically trying to operate on limited dollars and with limited staff, risked a substantial commitment of time and energy to develop this service; and individuals—many uncertain of the value of their experience, their opinions, their capacity to learn and to analyze—might well have been hesitant to reveal their vulnerability before a group of their peers.

There is now a consensus: the risk was well worth taking. The bet that older people—particularly those deprived of the opportunity in their younger years—want to learn is now beginning to pay off. Many centers have derived from their experience a new definition of what a senior center is, of how leisure time can be spent, of how people want to spend it. Centers not only have new programs; they have new people coming to them as members; new people are providing services; and members are making new contributions to their communities:

—A course in Victorian poetry by a humanist-in-residence in the center in Colorado Springs;

—A course on Nashville in the Twenties which is being developed by a scholar in conjunction with center members;

—Serious archival research on Black women in

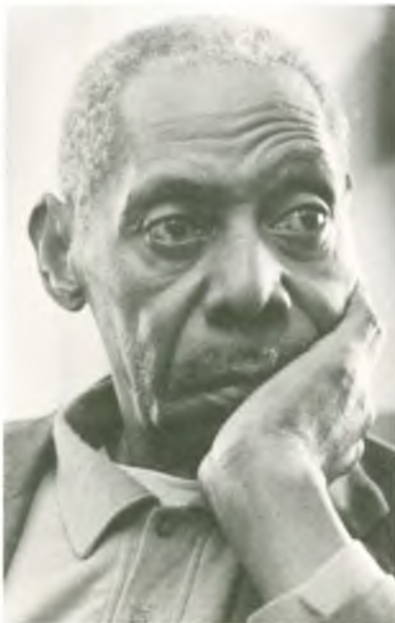
Rhode Island (which produced materials now in the National Archives);

—Appointment of two individuals to the preservation committee in Fairfield, California, after participation in the local history unit, which led to community activity, research, and evaluation of historic buildings threatened by development plans.

The list goes on and on, but the main points are clear and simple. The opportunity to learn and to share the wisdom that life's experiences have given has been received with enthusiasm and seriousness. That says something very positive about the need to make the humanities accessible and appealing to a broad range of the American people. It says something about the ways in which the disciplines of the humanities can enrich lives, and perhaps bring about a change in our nation.

History is something we share as well as influence, a fact often stated in high-flown terms. But it can be said more simply, as it was at a discussion of *Raisin in the Sun* at a senior center: "Don't cold-water the old people because they've got experience in the way you've got to go," and "Don't cold-water the young people because they're going to take our place and we've got to help them."

—*Valerie S. Peacock*



NOTICE

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C. Vann Woodward to Give Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities

C. Vann Woodward, Sterling Professor Emeritus of American History at Yale University, has been elected by the National Council on the Humanities to give the seventh annual Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities on May 3 at the Library of Congress in Washington, D. C., with a second lecture to be delivered at the University of Washington in Seattle on May 8.

The theme of Professor Woodward's lecture, inspired by the events of the U. S. Bicentennial in 1976, is the European Vision of America. His work over the past 40 years has been devoted to the history of the American South and the betterment of race relations. Among his books are *Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel* (1938); *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (1955); *The Burden of Southern History* (1960); and *American Counterpoint* (1971).

The Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities is an annual event sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities in order that "thinkers of international reputation might have a forum for their ideas, that humanistic insights of importance might reach the public, and that living issues might be the test of humane learning."

Previous Jefferson Lecturers have been Lionel Trilling, Erik Erikson, Robert Penn Warren, Paul Freund, John Hope Franklin, and Saul Bellow. The lectures are customarily broadcast by National Public Radio and published subsequent to delivery.

NEH Appropriation

The Federal Government's budget for FY 1979 submitted to Congress in January includes $100.3 million in regular program funds for NEH, $7.5 million to match gifts given to specific projects approved by the National Council on the Humanities, $27 million for Challenge Grants, which require $3.00 in private gifts for each $1.00 from Federal funds, and $10.8 million for administrative funds. This total request of $145.6 million compares with a total of $121 million appropriated for FY 1978.

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