Artists Blaze the Way Into Creative Old Age

by Barbara MacRobie

Sabra Tull Meyer was 81 years old when she unveiled her heroically sized monument to Lewis and Clark’s Corps of Discovery on the grounds of the Missouri Capitol in Jefferson City.

For many artists, that would have been the grand finale of their career.

But that was six and a half years ago. And Sabra is busier than ever.

This year alone, Sabra has finished a larger-than-life group of a contemporary farm couple and their baby for the headquarters of MFA Incorporated, a regional farm supply and marketing cooperative in her home town of Columbia. She completed portrait busts for Westminster College, the University of Central Missouri, and the Kansas City Chiefs’ Arrowhead Stadium. “And I’m currently working on what may turn out to be a large piece, that would be on a college campus and honor woman pioneers in the computer field,” she said.

Sabra is aging the way we all want to. Her health is strong, her mind keen, her creativity fresh. She has had to make only small concessions to the mileage on the mechanism. It’s the same with the four other Missouri artists in their 80s with whom we talked: painter Don Rayburn, ballet teacher Alexandra Zaharias, fiddler Cliff Bryan, and tap dancer Billie Mahoney.

Undoubtedly some of this is due to luck. We all know vibrantly creative people whose selves have been stolen by dementia or another disease. But there is a steadily growing body of evidence that making art—not just consuming it, but actively creating, teaching, or performing it—makes a critical difference to the latter stages of our lives.
“Chocolate to the brain”

“There’s been such wonderful research coming out of social gerontology,” said Deb Campbell, executive director of Kansas City Senior Theatre. “It opens your eyes to health and wellness and the sense of wellbeing of people who have lived their art throughout their life, and how their art has sustained and nourished them. Then there are those who found their passions later in life. No matter when we begin making art, it changes the way we age.”

Deb sees this for herself every day, since her company creates intergenerational, interactive storytelling and theatre together with elders at senior centers, retirement complexes, memory care centers, and other community contexts.

Dr. Bradley J. Fisher, professor of psychology and coordinator of the gerontology program at Missouri State University, has spent 38 years working with older adults, 34 of those years in academia teaching about aging. He had his first intense experience with older artists in 1995 when he decided to organize an exhibition focusing on their work.

“I had for some time been looking at the whole concept of aging well,” Dr. Fisher told us. “I was playing around with the idea that the impact of the arts on successful aging went beyond simply artistic talent—that the skill sets involved in producing artistic work also carried over into the rest of life. My wife is an artist, and I could that in her at an early age.

“I was 40 at the time, and I thought, we’re all getting older, there must be older artists out there—let’s find some and see what happens.”

The exhibit, produced by the university at the Juanita K. Hammons Hall for the Performing Arts, was a runaway success. It immediately became an annual tradition that Dr. Fisher’s gerontology program continues to organize (the 2015 exhibit is March 18-April 9).

“Artists from 65 to 85 entered their work,” said Dr. Fisher. “They were so excited about showing they were still vibrant and vital. I was so moved by them. After the second exhibit, I knew I had to look closely at their lives.”

Dr. Fisher and co-researcher Diana K. Specht published their results, based on interviews with 36 Springfield artists from ages 60 to 93, in 1999 in the Journal of Aging Studies as the article Successful Aging and Creativity in Later Life. “My experiences in the years since then have only confirmed my ideas,” Dr. Fisher said.

“Artists use the same coping skills they develop during art work to cope with everyday life, including events like illness, widowhood, and friends dying. I’ve seen a direct connection,” he said.
“In art, nothing is ever going to go smoothly. Maybe an angle in your painting is off, or your sculpture doesn’t quite balance. You fret over it but you don’t treat obstructions only as frustrations, but as opportunities to reevaluate, reflect, learn, move on, and do something better.”

Seminal research on a national scale was conducted by psychiatrist Gene Cohen, director of George Washington University’s Center on Aging, Health and the Humanities. For The Creative and Aging Study, published in 2006, he followed 300 people ages 65 to 103 for five years. Half of them made art through participatory programs. The other half did not.

“Dr. Cohen tracked very concrete things: doctors’ visits, connectiveness in the community, cognitive improvements,” said Deb Campbell. “The results in the group who took part in the active arts programs were much better even than expected.”

New studies keep piling up. In one of the latest, a German study published in July 2014, researchers analyzed brain scans of people between 62 and 70 who took a hands-on workshop and then created their own art. The researchers compared those scans with brain scans of people who took an art appreciation course. In the hands-on group—but not in the course group—the scans revealed improved connections between certain regions of the brain.

“My brain’s going all the time,” said the youngest artist we interviewed, 81-year-old Don Rayburn. In his story and those of Sabra Tull Meyer, Alexandra Zaharias, Cliff Bryan, and Billie Mahoney, their experiences show just how creative work, in Dr. Gene Cohen’s favorite phrase, is “like chocolate to the brain.”

**Don Rayburn | Painter**

*Born August 27, 1933*

“I’ve always been a designer of things,” said Don Rayburn.

For much of Don’s life, his art ran in tandem with his career as a general contractor. Born in Des Moines, he graduated from Iowa State University, served in the U.S. Army, and worked in Iowa until “one winter we got 20 feet of snow and I decided to move to Florida,” he said. While in Vero Beach, he specialized in custom homes. “I designed every house I ever built,” he said.

As a hobby, Don worked with wood, turning bowls and vases, and designing and building furniture. He painted oils and watercolors. He was the president of the 700-member Vero Beach Art Club and exhibited his oils and watercolors at the club’s shows, which often attracted audiences of 50,000 people.

Don and his wife, Pamela, came back to the Midwest in 2004. “My kids are all up in Iowa and Minnesota, so they wanted us to move closer,” he said. “When I lived in Des Moines we’d vacation at Lake of the Ozarks, but that was a little bit too far north for me! So Pamela and I did an exploratory trip to Springfield and thought it was a pretty nice place.”
We learned about Don through the Studio 55 Fine Arts Guild, the Springfield-based group of artists and art lovers that grew out of the first Missouri State University exhibition for older artists. “During the show, people were coming up to me and saying, ‘Gee, wouldn’t it be great if there were an art guild for people like us?’” recalled Dr. Fisher. “So after the exhibit, several artists and I got together at a Springfield coffee shop. We kept meeting every couple of weeks. They chose the name because they wanted the guild to be open to anyone 55 and above, so they’d always have an influx of new people.”

Studio 55 meets monthly at the gallery of the National Avenue Christian Church in center-city Springfield for speakers and classes, said Sandra Letson, board president. “We have a fantastic group of people who are all supportive of each other, giving classes and helping each other,” she said.

“Some members are long-time professional artists. Others are people who did art when they were younger and now want to get back into it. Others are 100-percent beginners. In the 20 years since we started, some beginners have learned so much that they’ve gone on to become professionals. We welcome everyone from the community to join us.”

Don joined Studio 55 shortly after moving to Springfield. “For a long time I was the only guy among about 30 women—I’d call them my harem!” he said. “I’ve taken a lot of classes in many mediums. Each artist has a different look at how things are. I take from each class what I can use for my own art.”

“Don always exhibits in all our shows,” said Sandra. Each year, Studio 55 mounts several exhibits in various locations including the church gallery, local restaurants, Juanita K. Hammons Hall, the Creamery Arts Center, branches of the Springfield-Greene County Library District, and the Springfield-Greene County Botanical Center.

“Don is very interested in learning new things and takes classes all the time,” said Sandra. “He always has good suggestions from his experiences as a member of other arts groups. He’ll jump right in any time things need to be done. He has been on our board of directors, but he’s retiring from the board to spend more time taking classes and painting.”

Don said his favorite medium was oil, followed by acrylic and pastels. He also enjoys carving animals and, when we talked with him, was engaged on a 2-foot-long turtle. “Just for fun, just to see if I could do it,” he said.

“My mind is always going in different directions,” Don said. “I’ll wonder how or why something happened, and try to figure out how I can capture it. I’ll be doing that as long as I can move my fingers.”

More about Don Rayburn and Studio 55 Fine Arts Guild
- Studio 55 website, studio55arts.blogspot.com
- Studio 55 Facebook Page (updated weekly with Guild activities)
Alexandra Zaharias  |  Ballet teacher

*Born February 1, 1929*

Many ballet dancers turn to teaching when their performing careers end. Not Alexandra Zaharias. “I knew I wanted to be a teacher from the time I was 12,” she said. Now she is looking at celebrating her 65th anniversary of teaching the highest standards of classical dance.

Alexandra opened her Alexandra School of Ballet in 1949 in the heart of St. Louis when she was 20, newly back home after four years in New York at the School of American Ballet and the School of Ballet Repertory. Based in the suburb of Chesterfield since 1966, Alexandra’s school and her pre-professional dance company, Alexandra Ballet, perform a full season every year that includes a *Nutcracker*, another full-length ballet, and collections of shorter pieces.

Beloved as “Miss A” by her students, she has sent many to professional careers and profoundly influenced countless more. She has served on national, state, and regional boards. She has racked up honors such as the national Hellenic American Achievement Award, an Excellence in the Arts Award from the Arts & Education Council in St. Louis, and in May 2014, the first Lifetime Achievement Award ever presented in Midwest by Regional Dance America.

“The lifetime award kind of made me sit back and say, ‘Oh, I’m 85—does that mean I have to quit?’” Alexandra told KSDK-TV. “But I’m not quitting. This is my life.”

Alexandra began studying dance during the Depression. “We didn’t have a lot of money. I remember how my first teacher, Isabella Finley, asked my mother what we could afford. ‘It’s rough,’ my mother said. ‘What about a dollar a week?’ And Miss Finley said yes.”

Alexandra learned many different dance styles including tap, but when she saw *Swan Lake* at St. Louis’ Kiel Opera House (now the Peabody), “I knew I really wanted to do ballet,” she said. “I had to be sure I was
a good dancer before I went into teaching others. That’s how when I was 16, I got on the train by myself and went to New York. I did have relatives there I stayed with, so my mother felt safe!

Alexandra said that Thalia Mara, director of the School of Ballet Repertory, was her mentor. “She told me, ‘When you go back home, don’t get into a shell. Spread yourself out and see if you can help the community understand good ballet. Keep up the traditions of classical dance!'”

Alexandra has spent the past 65 years doing just that. “It doesn’t seem possible!” she said.

On February 21, a scant three weeks after she turns 86, Alexandra will be honored at her company’s Saturday performance of the Romantic masterpiece Giselle. The evening will include the first screening of Miss A: A Gift of Grace, a documentary by Georgia Reed, one of Alexandra’s students. “She is getting photos and interviews from alumni all over the world,” Alexandra said. “It’s wonderful for me to hear all their memories and comments about what made them want to go on.”

On Georgia Reed’s Facebook Page for the documentary, she sums up Alexandra: “While many of her students have gone on to become professional dancers all over the world, many more have gone on to other career paths—but the education, discipline, music appreciation, grace, and good posture Miss A taught at her school affected each and every one of her pupils. She made a positive contribution not only to her community, but to the world, through the art of dance.”

At the entrance to Alexandra’s studio hangs a photo of one of her star students, Louise Nadeau, retired prima ballerina of Seattle’s Pacific Northwest Ballet. “I tell my young students, ‘She started just like you!’

“We sometimes promote children from one class to another to challenge them. At first they’re not as good as the other dancers in the class. But when they start getting it, that’s so gratifying. I said to a little girl just the other day, ‘You’re doing it—you’re going to make it!’”

Classical ballet makes intense physical demands. Alexandra has slowed her teaching schedule to three days a week, and no longer performs the dance moves in class herself. “I have wonderfully talented demonstrators,” she said. “I never thought I could teach only verbally, but with them at my side, I can. One of my demonstrators, Zoe Malinksi, wants to go on and teach. I think that’s so important, that my students don’t want just to be professional dancers. There’s not enough room for everyone. I look to see someone who wants to do what I wanted to do. It’s exciting for me to see it happening with another generation right beside me.”

In July 2014, Alexandra named her longtime colleague Cici Houston as co-artistic director of Alexandra Ballet. A former professional dancer with a distinguished stage career, Cici had been on the faculty since 2003 and associate director since 2011. “We’re now working even more closely together,” Alexandra said. “Maybe in another year I’ll be ready to step down and be emeritus! But I need this transition time, too—to be able to give it up gracefully.”

However, she said, “I’ll still run the school. I hope I’ll be teaching ballet with my last breath!”

More about Alexandra Zaharias and Alexandra Ballet

- alexandraballet.com
- Keeping Ballerinas on Their Toes for 65 Years, feature on KSDK-TV, July 30, 2014
“I was about 14 or 15 when I got my first fiddle,” said Cliff Bryan. “We lived out in the sticks about 12 miles north of West Plains, and back then in the 1930s and ’40s there were no music teachers within 100 miles. So I never learned to read music. But I learned to play from other fiddlers, and I took to playing pretty good.”

That’s a huge understatement, said Lisa Higgins, director of the Missouri Arts Council’s Missouri Folk Arts Program. “Cliff is a fabulous fiddler!” she said. “And the sweetest man you’ll ever meet.”

Lisa has been working with Cliff for 14 years through the Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program. Since 1984, this program has paired veteran Missouri folk artists with apprentices to pass on their traditions. Master and apprentice meet regularly for lessons for nine months.

“In the spring of 2000,” Lisa said, “our Folk Arts Specialist Deb Bailey and I headed down from our offices in Columbia to rural Pomona to Cliff’s family farm to observe a lesson with his apprentice, Don Buedel, and their backup guitarist. Cliff and his wife, Sue, welcomed us into their home, and we set up our recorder and shot some film. We had a lovely time, and after the lessons enjoyed donuts and coffee with everyone before checking into a nearby motel for the night,” she said.

“That was one of the last evenings that Cliff and Sue spent at the farm. They auctioned it off the following weekend. They moved into town to West Plains and have enjoyed a nice retirement that is full of music.”

Cliff is a rare bird: an old-time short-bow fiddler. When he plays, he touches the strings with only the top five or six inches of the bow. This style is unusual even within the Ozarks, and makes Lisa and Deb value all the more the six apprenticeships that Cliff has led.

“I didn’t know I was a short-bow player until I got mixed up with Lisa and Debbie,” Cliff told us. “I’d never heard of that before. I guess that’s what I am!”

Cliff said his teaching method is “show and tell.” “By ear—that’s the way I have to do it. I wish I was more knowledgeable. But the folk arts students seem to get along good with it.”
“Cliff is one of those artists we’ve worked with over the years,” Lisa said, “who learned to play or craft as a youngster, was active into the teens or early adulthood, mostly put things aside to raise a family, and then picked back up.”

Cliff told us the first interruption in his fiddling was when he was drafted into the Army. “Then there were times when I quit for two or three years to make a living. I was running cattle and hogs on the farm. In the ’60s, I went into the real estate business.” Once he retired, though, “I’ve been at it ever since.”

“It’s been almost 15 years since we visited Cliff at his farm,” said Lisa, “and everyone agrees he has become an even better fiddler in that time.” Cliff’s fiddling was recently recorded by St. Louis-based folklorist and musician Jim Nelson, and Lisa said she was eagerly awaiting the release of the CD.

Cliff said he fiddles in his home every day, because “it don’t take long to lose it.” In public, he plays at local festivals and “picking parties,” informal gatherings of musicians and friends. “Not too long ago, I had a music party here at the house. I’m playing tonight in the American Legion Hall,” he told us. “We have a meeting there every Monday night for anybody who wants to play.”

Cliff said he no longer plays at square dances. “And I can tell you that at my age, you sometimes lose your concentration! Sometimes I can’t remember how to start every tune,” he said.

“But it somebody gets them started, I’ll finish them. I’m going on 88 now. But I still have a lot of fun.”

More about Cliff Bryan

▪ A profile of Cliff, including an audio clip of him fiddling, by the Missouri Folk Arts Program

Billie Mahoney | Tap dancer

Born November 23, 1927

We caught up with Billie Mahoney two days after her 87th birthday party—held in a jazz club, where she danced with the band. She took time out to talk from preparing for her dance troupe’s big show at Kansas City’s Union Station December 7. “And I have a concert with the New Horizons Band a week from today—I have several drum solos—I’ve got a lot of practicing to do!” she said. That’s in addition to teaching tap four days a week at the Kansas City Ballet’s Todd Bolender Center and City in Motion Dance School, producing a public access TV show, twirling batons at a local health club, prepping the class she’ll teach at UMKC in the spring, and archiving her notations of historic dances for the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Billie Mahoney began her adventures in dance as a toddler, and she’s moved at rocket speed ever since.

Billie was dancing professionally at Midwestern military bases, conventions, clubs, and bars even as a young teen. A year after she graduated from the University of Missouri–Kansas City, she moved to New York City. There she twirled her batons with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, danced in nightclubs, and acquired a master’s degree in media studies.
Billie also became a specialist in the Labanotation system of writing down the movements of dances and taught the system for 15 years at the world-renowned Juilliard School. “I was one of the second-generation Labanotation pioneers,” she said. She notated and reconstructed dances by masters from George Balanchine to José Limon, whose assistant she was. She was on the faculty of the Dance Notation Bureau and contributed to the standard Labanotation textbook.

While in New York, Billie interned at a local public access television studio and ended up producing her own Dance On With Billie Mahoney, “a show about people who dance,” for 15 years. Her early shows featured interviews with her teachers, colleagues, and students. Among later guests were such renowned dancers as Alvin Ailey and Todd Bolender as well as Bebe Neuwirth, who had been a promising student of Billie’s.

In 1992, Billie moved back home to Kansas City to be with her 86-year-old mother. “She was an inspiration,” Billie said. “She was active until the night before she died at age 93.” Billie continued to dance and teach. She started her Billie Mahoney Dance Troupe for women ages 50 and up.

About three years ago, Billie revived Dance On with the student-run station at UMKC. “I had done 250 shows when I was in New York, and I’ve done about 150 so far in Kansas City,” she said. “All my New York shows are at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.” Billie also works with Kansas City Senior Theatre. “When I was in the audience,” said Executive Director Deb Campbell, “and she was being interviewed, her laugh was contagious, especially when she was so immersed that you could see her literally reliving the whole experience, getting up out of her chair demonstrating the move. She is so agile in the telling of her story.”

Billie does the Shim Sham with fellow Kansas City dancer Ronald McFadden as her Billie Mahoney Dance Troupe cheers them on, at Union Station for Armed Forces Day on May 14, 2014 – photo courtesy of © Mike Strong, kcdance.com

At Union Station on December 7, the Billie Mahoney Dance Troupe will be joined by four other Kansas City companies. Billie will emcee and introduce the numbers. Her last full performance dancing in public was about two years ago at the mid-America EMMY® Awards. “My feet do not articulate the way they did,” she said. “I had a knee injury when I was dancing with the Palm Springs Follies in 2003, and it’s tightened up. So I can’t hop on my left leg. I do heel drops instead [hard drops of the heel to the floor while the weight is on the ball of the foot]. And the asthma I developed when I was performing on a USO tour in Korea in 30-degree weather is coming back,” she said.

“But I hold on. I do the full warm-ups. You’ve got to stay active. If I have a weekend with no classes, I can’t move. But once I get in the studio for an hour, I’m fine,” she said.
“I demonstrate in my classes. I dance at tap jams where dancers get together and improvise. I can't do a three-minute routine any more, but I can still improv 16 bars at a time! Maybe I'll do the Shim Sham with the troupe at the end," she said. (This classic routine, invented in the 1920s, traditionally ends tap shows with all the performers getting together on stage.)

Even when the body can’t do heavy stomps and high kicks any more, tap dancing keeps the mind active, Billie said. "I'm always giving my students different warm-ups. We don’t do the same trite stuff over and over—I reconfigure the patterns with different rhythms and challenges. They'll complain, ‘I can’t remember the combination!’ I tell them, ‘This keeps you young!’"

“Billie amazes me by how she continues to work tirelessly, generously—building on past work and making her mark, having a huge impact locally and beyond,” said Deb.

“I've had careers in jazz dance, tap, modern, dance notation, dance administration, and media studies, and I still have some aspect of each of them going," Billie said. "I would die if I stopped."

More about Billie Mahoney
- bmahoneyontap.wordpress.com
- Billie Mahoney danced with the best of them—and at 80, this sexy number isn't done yet, The Pitch, February 28, 2008

Sabra Tull Meyer  |  Sculptor
Born May 5, 1927

“There’s something about the permanence of bronze that I really like,” said Sabra Tull Meyer. “Knowing my work can still be there in a hundred years. Or even longer—they've brought up ancient Greek bronzes from the seabed. How cool, thinking of my art being archaeology of the future!”

Bronze is Sabra’s medium. People are her subjects. “I’ve always loved the human figure, particularly the human face,” she said. “I seem to have an affinity for recreating a likeness. I love to look at faces. Each face is so fascinating and unique. I have to catch myself sometimes not to be staring at someone!”

Sabra started her artistic journey with faces, but not in bronze. “I'd always loved sculpture, but it was not offered by the University of Missouri when I was an undergrad,” she said. So for her major in art, she drew and painted. Shortly after she graduated in 1949, she married James Meyer, and for the next couple of decades, they reared four children. “We moved to Kansas City, then Dallas, then back to Columbia,” she said, “and in each of those places I found a group who was interested in painting, so I could keep my hand in.”

When Sabra’s youngest reached high school and learned to drive, Sabra decided to go to graduate school. By this point, the University of Missouri was offering sculpture.

“I was 49 when I applied to graduate school," Sabra said. “Not very many older people were going back to school back then. I was so worried about what the students would think! But the kids were wonderful. They just accepted me. Some of them even told me, ‘I wish my mom would do something like this!’"
In 1979, Sabra received her master of arts and began teaching in the fashion/art department of Stephens College. She went on for a master of fine arts in 1982. “Meanwhile, I began to pursue private commissions,” she said. “I did some portrait busts. Over the years, it just kind of grew. A lot of what happens to us in life is luck, but when the luck comes, you have to be ready. I don’t think that’s an original thought!” she laughed. “But sometimes you have to take a leap of faith that you can do something.”

Sabra’s biggest leap of faith, she said, was a seven-year journey that began in 2001 when the Jefferson City Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Task Force asked her to commemorate the night the Corps of Discovery camped at what became the Missouri capital. “First we started with busts of Lewis and Clark. Then we added Lewis’s dog. The project grew,” Sabra said. “In the end I had four men and a dog in heroic scale, more than life-sized. Lewis is 9-feet-plus because of his hat. I had never done a full life-sized outdoor figure. But having done life-sized torsos and hands, I said to myself, I can do this! It remains my largest piece.”

Sabra did her own casting in graduate school—“you must understand the process,” she said. “But like many sculptors who don’t have their own foundry, I depend on one to complete my work.” The Corps of Discovery was cast by the Crucible Foundry in Norman, Oklahoma, which as well as Eligius Bronze in Kansas City casts all Sabra’s bronzes. “With the ‘lost wax’ process, I start with a clay model. If I need the final sculpture to be bigger, the foundry digitally enlarges it. Then they make a hollow wax mold that looks exactly like my model. That wax goes through another mold, the wax is melted out, and the molten bronze is poured in.”

The Corps figures were so tall that when Sabra worked on them at the foundry, she needed to stand on a ladder. “I don’t know if I’ll be up on a ladder for any more work,” she said. “My children say, ‘NO, you won’t!’ When I did the farm family for MFA Incorporated, the foundry cut the figures in half at the waist so I could work either standing or sitting. The foundry is so wonderful—they seem to accept me age and all.”

Sabra has created more than 70 works of public art in Missouri alone, from busts in the Capitol’s Hall of Famous Missourians to the 56-foot-long sculptural mural at Columbia’s historic Missouri Theatre. Several hundred works are in private collections nationwide. Her rich list of awards includes two honors from the University of Missouri and the Individual Artist honor of the 2014 Missouri Arts Awards.
Commissions continue to flow Sabra’s way. “The only thing that will stop me will be, I guess, impairment or death!” she said.

“Whenever I’m asked to speak, I tell people that especially in our country where people live well into their 80s, you have plenty of time to have another career. It’s never too late to start.”

More about Sabra Tull Meyer
▪ sabratullmeyer.com
▪ Heart of bronze, Columbia Tribune, March 2, 2008

Art for a noble age

When Sabra was nominated for the 2014 Missouri Arts Awards, one of the supporting documents came from Cathy Salter of the Boone County Museum and Galleries. In her letter, she wrote, “Sabra works with an energy that belies her noble age.”

A noble age…an evocative way to describe a time that, as artists powerfully demonstrate, can be full of growth and life.

More and more of us are entering that time. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2011 there were about 40 million Americans age 65 and older. By 2019, there will be 50 million. By 2050, nearly 80 million.

As the population burgeons, arts organizations across the U.S. and in Missouri are responding. The Missouri Arts Council is working closely with the National Center for Creative Aging to build a network of Missouri organizations and artists offering programs that encourage older people to be actively creative. Organizations such as Kansas City Senior Theatre and Artfully Aging conduct arts programs in community settings. Organizations such as Studio 55 and Maturity and Its Muse provide education, social hubs, and exhibit opportunities for elder artists from longtime professionals to those just embarking on their quest.

“As we age, we continue to create ourselves,” said Dr. Fisher. “Often older people will say, ‘I'm not very creative.’ But living a life well—dealing with all life throws at us—processing the circumstances that confront us and figuring out a way to cope—that is a daily act of creation.

“In talking with old artists, I’ve always found their involvement in art is less about the product and more about the activity and the sense of purpose. Art becomes a medium through which they are finding new understandings about life, new ways to connect with other people,” he said.

“Art is about expressing yourself, growing yourself even as you grow in your art skills. That is what is at the heart of creative aging.”

All photos are courtesy of the artists unless otherwise indicated.

Artists Blaze the Way Into Creative Old Age was created in December 2014 for the Missouri Arts Council, a state agency and division of the Department of Economic Development. The Missouri Arts Council provides grants to nonprofit organizations that meet our strategic goals of increasing participation in the arts in Missouri, growing Missouri’s economy using the arts, and strengthening Missouri education through the arts. For information, contact moarts@ded.mo.gov.

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