



Strengthening Intergenerational Bonds In Immigrant And Refugee Communities



A publication of



The Intergenerational Center
 TEMPLE UNIVERSITY

Supported by

MetLife Foundation

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our appreciation to our community partners who invested a great deal of time and energy into the development of programs that fostered meaningful intergenerational connections. In particular, we would like to thank Rorng Sorn, Sarun Chan, and Chanphy Heng from the Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia; Nancy Nguyen and Quynh Tran from Boat People SOS, Pamela Cantero and Coralito Albares from El Centro de Accion Social, and Saeed Fahia and Fatima Hussein from the Confederation of Somali Community of Minnesota.

Finally, we would like to express our gratitude to MetLife Foundation for their generous support and their commitment to using intergenerational strategies for promoting healthy aging in diverse communities.

The Intergenerational Center At Temple University

Created in 1979, the Intergenerational Center at Temple University brings generations together to address critical community concerns and promotes lifelong civic engagement. As an international leader in the intergenerational field, the Center:

- *develops innovative intergenerational program models* and initiatives that foster cross-age relationships and meet community needs;
- *builds the capacity* of organizations, institutions, government agencies and funders to utilize intergenerational approaches to enhance their effectiveness; and
- *conducts evaluation and research* that identifies promising practices and generates new knowledge.

Rather than focusing on just one issue, we have demonstrated the effectiveness of intentionally using an intergenerational lens to confront many of the pressing challenges that face individuals, families and communities. Our programs, both national and local in scope, engage culturally, economically and age diverse populations in a spectrum of civic roles that support children and youth, help caregiving families, foster immigrant integration, and build community capacity. The Center's national training and technical assistance services have helped thousands of non-profit organizations, foundations, and government agencies infuse intergenerational strategies into their programs and services and promote opportunities for lifelong civic engagement. In 2011 Center was awarded the inaugural Eisner Prize for Intergenerational Excellence and the Migration Policy Institute's E Pluribus Unum Award for promoting immigrant integration.

For more information on the Intergenerational Center, go to www.templeigc.org

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Made possible by a grant from MetLife Foundation



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I. Introduction

Recent research suggests that there is a growing schism between generations in many immigrant and refugee families. Language barriers and conflicting demands on each generation make it challenging to maintain meaningful intergenerational relationships. Many elders feel a sense of disappointment that the level of cross-generational interaction within their families is superficial and yearn for opportunities to transmit their culture and experiences to younger generations. New strategies for helping immigrant and refugee elders maintain a sense of purpose and share their cultural knowledge are critical. Engaging elders in intergenerational activities outside their family units is one way to address this generational divide. With support from MetLife Foundation, the Intergenerational Center at Temple University worked with four ethnic community-based organizations to implement an initiative entitled Strengthening Intergenerational Bonds in Immigrant and Refugee Communities.

The overall goals of the initiative were to: 1) promote healthy aging in refugee and immigrant communities by developing programming designed to build meaningful relationships among non-familial youth and older adults; and 2) to increase the capacity of ethnic-based community organizations to strengthen intergenerational connectedness. Seed grants

were provided to four ethnic-based community organizations: the Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia, Philadelphia, PA. (Cambodian), BP-SOS-Delaware Valley, Camden, NJ. (Vietnamese), Confederation of Somali Communities in Minnesota, MN. (East African) and El Centro de Acción Social, Pasadena, CA. (Mexican), to implement culturally appropriate intergenerational programming. Each site brought together young people and elders from their community to engage in a series of activities to promote mutual trust and learning. Sharing stories of resiliency- the ability to overcome adversity- was a key strategy used by all sites to promote understanding and connection across ages. Technical assistance was provided to pilot sites by staff from Project SHINE, the Intergenerational Center's national initiative that mobilizes college students to help immigrant and refugee elders prepare for citizenship, acquire health literacy skills, and engage in meaningful civic roles.

This report presents four case studies that highlight recruitment strategies, key intergenerational activities, challenges, and outcomes for fostering intergenerational connections. The report concludes with a summary of promising practices, benefits, and recommendations for practitioners.



II. Background Research

Prior to this initiative, the Temple University Intergenerational Center conducted research on healthy aging and intergenerational relationships in immigrant and refugee families (<http://templeigc.org/resources/research>). Findings suggest that immigrant and refugee families exhibit both a schism between generations and an ability to adapt to traditional practices in the American socio-cultural context. Varying levels of intergenerational tension due to differing expectations, values, and beliefs can lead to feelings of despair among elders who view strong family ties and the success of younger generations as key components of healthy aging. Recognizing the challenges of working within family structures, this study suggests that ethnic community-based organizations could play a sig-

nificant role in strengthening generational bonds. Recommendations from this research included: 1) Creating safe spaces to bring generations together to build mutual respect and explore commonalities and differences; 2) Developing creative ways to generate cross-age discussions despite language differences; 3) Creating formal programs for unrelated older adults and youth to provide support and interact with each other; and 4) Developing facilitation skills of community leaders to build their capacity to foster positive and mutually beneficial intergenerational relationships. The study also suggested that opportunities for ongoing interaction between generations can foster the development of kin-like relationships and reduce feelings of isolation.



III. Case Studies



CAMBODIAN ASSOCIATION OF GREATER PHILADELPHIA

LEGACY PROJECT:

Youth and Elders Unite as a Collective Voice for the Community

“The intergenerational project has been transformative....It has proven that the organization can shift its approach to work with youth and elders. Program participants became our own leaders.”

— *Rorng Sorn, Executive Director, Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia*

Background Information

Cambodian Community in Philadelphia

The genocide by the Khmer Rouge regime in the mid-1970's created a mass exodus of Cambodian people. Between 1979 and 1985, over 130,000 Cambodians were resettled in the United States after several years of hiding in the jungle and living in refugee camps in Thailand. Today, Pennsylvania has the fourth largest Cambodian population in the

country. According to the Census, approximately 11,000 Cambodian-Americans reside in the Philadelphia region, though local estimates are closer to 20,000. Although the Cambodian refugees in Philadelphia appreciate the opportunity to start a new life in a democratic society, they continue to struggle socio-economically. Lack of health care access, poor school conditions and an expanding generation gap are major challenges in the community (Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians, 2004). According to the Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia, generational disconnect stems from different levels of acculturation among generations. Ways of expressing discipline, support and affection frequently result in conflict between parents, grandparents and their children. The youth who are raised in a Western environment often do not understand how Cambodian elders and parents show their love and care through discipline. Grandparents and parents who have experienced severe trauma in Cambodia have a hard time empathizing with the younger generation's daily struggles as teenagers in an urban environment.

The Cambodia Association of Greater Philadelphia (CAGP):

Founded in 1979, the mission of the Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia is to improve

the quality of life of Cambodian-Americans through direct service, advocacy and cultural education (<http://cagp.org/>). CAGP launched the Legacy project in January, 2011 with a mini grant from Khmer Health Advocates based in Connecticut to promote healthy life styles through food and intergenerational engagement. CAGP worked with the Intergenerational Center at Temple University and other CAGP partners to expand the scope of the Legacy Project in the second year by focusing more intentionally on the building of in-depth cross-generational relationships. Project activities included story-sharing, a joint advocacy trip to Washington D.C. and the creation of a photo-story exhibition of the Cambodian journey to the United States

Recruitment Strategies

CAGP drew upon the long term relationships it had built through its senior and youth programs to successfully recruit participants. Due to their trust of the organization, many youth and elders agreed to join the intergenerational project without hesitation. Nevertheless, the organization had to tailor its recruitment message for each age group.

For elders, the staff communicated that this was an opportunity to share their wisdom and experiences. Ms. Chanphy Heng, the Health Program Director, believes that the sense of appreciation and obligation elders have for CAGP motivated seniors to join the activities. She reported, *“Khmer elders are loyal. We have helped them through our services for years... They may not have financial means to contribute back, but they wanted to offer whatever resources and time they have for us.”* Elders reported that they saw their participation as a way to ‘give back’ to the services that their children and grandchildren have received from the organization. One elder noted, *“The Association helped my child a lot. My daughter is now doing well and she finished college. Participating in this program is like contributing back to CAGP.”* Some seniors indicat-

ed that they wanted to understand the life of their children and grandchildren.

The desire for connection was not enough to persuade high school students who have competing priorities in their lives to participate. Mr. Sarun Chan, the Associate Director of CAGP states, *“When working with youth, it is very important to give them a clear understanding of what we are doing and why we are doing it. They understood that this is an effort to help both generations understand each other’s lives and struggles. Most importantly, we will have an ending event which showcases a community timeline through stories and photos from seniors and youth. They understood that the final product was going to be presented to educate about our collective experiences to the general public. It is not about old folks, it is about the overall issues in the community.”*

Throughout the project, CAGP maintained a core group of 15 to 20 elders and 15 to 20 youth. Participants range from 14 to 79 year of age; 45 were female and 15 were male. Once the advocacy trip to Washington DC in March was announced to the community, it attracted more participation and a total of 60 elders and youth participated in the program at least once.

Intergenerational Activities

Creating a safe space for youth and elders to learn from their experience

After elder and youth groups met separately to learn about the project, CAGP facilitated a joint “meet and greet” session. At this occasion, a fun ice-breaker game, a formal project orientation and a joint discussion regarding their challenges and strengths were facilitated in both English and Khmer (elders’ native language). Youth reported that many Cambodian elders were neglected, felt isolated, and faced severe economic hardships. Elders learned that Cambodian youth were bullied



at school and that many lacked financial and emotional support from their parents. A sense of mutual respect and empathy emerged during this event.

Story Sharing

After a few months of activities that helped create a safe space for seniors and youth to interact, CAGP hosted a cross-generational photo and story sharing session. Elders were asked to bring their old photographs from Cambodia or from the refugee camp. Young people brought photographs of their families. They formed small groups consisting of a few youth and elders and shared the stories behind the photographs through bilingual interpretation. Mr. Peter Pin, a renowned professional photographer documenting the Cambodian diaspora, joined from New York to capture their interactions and took elders' portraits for his project.

Overall, the photo and story sharing experience facilitated in-depth understanding of Cambodian history and generated many questions among youth. One elder shared a photo of herself at the camp with a large identification number plate. She explained that the photo legitimized her refugee status and served as an ID for receiving food. Numerous signatures on the back of this old photograph indicated that camp officials had to sign the ID each time food assistance was provided.

For many elders, this was the first time they had openly shared stories of their difficult experiences

in Cambodia and the refugee camps with younger generations. According to Mr. Chan, there is a sense of trepidation to ask about the war and the refugee camp even if young people live with their grandparents and/or older parents. He commented, *"Elders feel they do not want to burden young generations with their dark and depressing stories, because they know we already have a lot of stress in our lives."* Ms. Rorong Sorn, the Executive Director of CAGP believes that it is very important to create a space for elders to tell their stories through this project. *"We gave a message, 'it is safe to tell your stories, and we are willing to listen.' Then when they share they have SO MUCH to share."*

Intergenerational Advocacy

CAGP created a cross-generational group of people who were committed to telling their stories on behalf of their community. They partnered with SEARAC (Southeast Asia Resource Action Center), a DC-based national organization that advances the interests of Southeast Asian communities, to involve youth and elders in advocacy efforts (<http://www.searac.org/>). SEARAC staff members facilitated advocacy training for the Legacy Project participants. Both elders and youth reflected on their current struggles and identified key issues they wanted to discuss with representatives in D.C. As a result of this training, specific themes and speakers were identified for an advocacy trip.

At the end of March, more than sixty Legacy members took a day trip to Washington D.C. to meet with staff at the White House Initiative on Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders, the Asian Congressional Caucus on Aging, Health and the Office of U.S. Representative Robert Brady¹. Elders and youth together presented compelling testimonials to the decision makers. With their confidence built through intergenerational storytelling and advocacy training, they became a powerful voice for the community. A youth participant who presented her testimonial expressed a sense of accomplishment, *“We achieved the same goal together.”* To Ms. Heng, who has worked with Cambodian seniors, this was a big accomplishment. *“Elders did not grow up in the environment that ordinary people can speak up their rights for the government. They were very nervous but we provided a lot of assurance and encouragement. For them to be out in Washington D.C. to voice their opinions with youth was an incredible accomplishment.”*

Elders and youth have become an intergenerational team of leaders. CAGP is currently tying together all the accomplishments from the project by organizing an exhibition of the Cambodian refugee’s journey. Collaborating with a local art gallery and Mr. Peter Pin, a renowned Cambodian American photographer dedicating to document the Cambodian diaspora, the elderly and youth project participants will showcase their collaborative work. Along with their rare photos from Cambodia, the camp, and today’s life in urban Philadelphia, they will present powerful stories of the Cambodian community’s struggles and resiliency.

Outcomes

CAGP’s efforts to promote intergenerational bonding have had positive outcomes for youth, elders and the organization. The following section describes key impacts on each group.

Impact on youth

Mr. Chan, the Associate Director and youth program organizer, has always believed that the CAGP’s youth program offers something that schools do not provide. Given that so many Cambodian American youth struggle with their cultural identity and yearn for a sense of belonging, CAGP *“prepares youth for their internal journey for their life.”* Mr. Chan believes that elders’ stories answered questions that their parents never answered due to lack of time, trust and their knowledge about Cambodia. Elders’ stories affirmed youth’s cultural heritage, resiliency and *“filled in their identity void.”* Mr. Chan stresses that the way youth think about their engagement with CAGP has changed. *“They are already thinking about a program that benefits not only them but their family and community overall. They are thinking more collectively.”* One youth participant articulated her determination to help elderly. *“I learned that elders are mostly invisible in the community.”* She believes that young people can contribute to the community by *“just listening to them, being there for them.”*

Impact on elders

Providing a safe space for Cambodian elders to share stories of struggle and resiliency with younger generations suggests the need to develop different mental health interventions. Many Cambodian Americans feel a cultural disconnect with western mental health services in the U.S. According to Ms. Sorn, *“Three decades of trauma (that our elders often carry) requires a wide range of mental health approaches. The traditional western intervention is not the only way to address mental health issues in our community.”* For elders, being listened to by youth and recognized for their strengths enhances their mental health. *“They had struggles but how have they overcome? Now we use the concept of resiliency with our clients — instead of pity, the focus on what they have overcome and accomplished. That helps them heal.”*

Ms. Heng believed, *“this project gave elders a sense of pride. They think young generations are*

1. The trip to Washington D.C. was made possible by the support of the Department of Behavioral Health/Intellectual Disability services (DBH/IDS).



more educated and often shy away from sharing their wisdom. Now they feel that young people want to know their life...Even if they do not have a degree, money, or education, they have so much to pass on.” Elderly participants felt that they motivated young people to strive for better lives and not to take their educational opportunities for granted. They also expressed that they now see the young generations as resources who can ‘guide them,’ “because they know more about the way of life here.” They believe that young generations can help elders navigate the American health and social service system with their bicultural and language skills. “Even though they are young, they can be my teacher. Young people can be knowledgeable and that is something I learned (from the project.)” They also felt that the program contributed to their health. “Coming here and interacting with one another makes me happy....if you stay home, feel isolated and that is depressing, that is not healthy.”

Impact on the organization

Ms. Rorng Sorn, the Executive Director of CAGP, highlighted the shifts in approaches they have made in their intergenerational work. *“I want to enhance our programming in innovative ways by asking, ‘what types of programming do we see in the future? Our programs should no longer be about serving youth and elderly. We want to involve them and empower them.”* According to Ms. Sorn, the intergenerational project has been “transformative.” It has proven that the organization can shift its approach to work with its community members. She stresses, *“program participants became our own leaders. We were not providing activities for them. They have become active ambassadors for our mission.”* Ms. Sorn now sees all of her community members as resources and leaders regardless of their age, education level and language ability. CAGP is transforming from a service agency to a facilitator of shared responsibilities by engaging



their community members across generations.

Another outcome identified by the staff was their increased ability to forge new collaborations within and across organizations. Mr. Chan says his approach to youth leadership development has changed. *“Now I am always thinking on how to connect intergenerationally. We have always collaborated with other youth programs in the city. But now, within CAGP, I see that we can connect kindergarteners to school kids, school kids to college kids, and you can develop a wide range of intergenerational connections within the organization.”* He believes that dynamic intergenerational programs can help strengthen family units in the community. He also stresses the urgency of capturing elders’ stories, *“Our elders are passing away. If we don’t create opportunities to listen to their stories, these stories will be lost forever. This is the time for us to preserve their stories.”*

For Ms. Heng, this project gave her a different perspective. As a service provider, she normally has endless problems to solve for her elderly clients. *“But this project brought me a joy. It gave me time to sit down with elders and learn about them and their lives...”*

Challenges

Staff and financial resources

CAGP staff indicated that financially, this has been a very difficult year for the organization. The main challenge to organizing intergenerational activities has been a lack of human and financial resources. Without a designated coordinator for the intergenerational program, the senior and the youth coordinators had to carry additional workloads and they spent significant time to make this program happen.

Language, Time and Transportation

Interpretation makes activities slower and time-consuming. Nevertheless, using both languages in the activities helped create a sense of respect and mutual understanding. Securing elder’s time and transportation was another challenge as Ms. Heng explains, *“Our elders, in fact, are quite busy. Their adult children count on them to take care of the house and their grandchildren, so they can go to work.”* For elders to come to the intergenerational activities, their family members had to drive them during their busy weekend. Buy-in from elders’ family was crucial.



Advice for other organizations

Through piloting cross-generational storytelling and advocacy activities, CAGP gained significant experience in facilitating intergenerational work in the community. The following are key learnings they want to share with other organizations trying to incorporate intergenerational strategies into their work.

- Cultural competency is the key for program design and facilitation. Build your knowledge about the youth and elders you are working with. If you are not from the community and do not share similar family experiences and hardships, you may not be able to facilitate activities they can relate to.
- Make sure your relationship with community members is strong through services and programming before you start the intergenerational activities.
- Understand what benefit youth and what benefit elders. Identify their pressing issues and passions first, and then design an intergenerational project which benefits both generations.
- Do not bring groups together right away. Prepare them separately first for the future collective work.



BOAT PEOPLE SOS— DELAWARE VALLEY

SOUTHEAST ASIAN ROOTS GARDEN:

Breaking Down the Wall between Generations

“Normally, there is no voice for youth in this communitybut I gained a voice through this experience. If these elders can hear my stories and acknowledge my experience, that’s a starting point to debunk the stereotype elders have about us (youth).”

—Youth participant

Background Information

Vietnamese Community in Camden, NJ

Since the fall of Saigon in 1975, waves of Vietnamese refugees have resettled in the U.S. after experiencing dangerous and traumatic journeys. In total, approximately 1.75 million Vietnamese migrated to America and other countries between 1975 and 2000. Vietnamese who continue to immigrate to the United States include Amerasians and former political prisoners who fought against the commu-

nist regime (Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians, 2004).

In Camden, NJ, the Vietnamese population is nearly 5,000. Many older male leaders affiliated with the BPSOS Camden are former military officials who came under the Humanitarian Operation after long years in captivity.² Although the Vietnamese refugees are grateful for the political freedom in their new land, their challenges continue. In addition to socio-economic challenges and language barriers, many multi-generational Vietnamese families face cultural and language barriers that make it difficult for elders and youth to develop meaningful relationships. According to Boat People SOS, at family and community events there are often “islands of youth” that rarely interact with groups of adults and seniors. Opportunities for cross-age engagement are limited.

BPSOS—Delaware Valley and the Southeast Asian Roots Intergenerational Garden

Boat People SOS-Delaware Valley is the local branch of BPSOS Inc., the largest national organization serving the Vietnamese community in the United States (www.bpsos.org). With its mission to empower, organize, and equip Vietnamese individuals and communities in their pursuit of liberty

2. Humanitarian Operation (HO) was set up to benefit former South Vietnamese who were involved in the former regime or worked for the U.S. They were to be allowed to immigrate to the U.S. if they had suffered persecution by the communist regime after 1975. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boat_people

and dignity, the Delaware Valley branch was established in 2000 to provide programs through two offices – one in Philadelphia, PA and one in Camden, NJ. Capable of delivering culturally competent and linguistically accessible services, the branch focuses on youth leadership development, family health promotion and civic engagement. Several years ago, the Camden operation developed a partnership with the Vietnamese Senior Association of Camden (VSAC). Comprised of more than 100 members, the association works with BPSOS to host health workshops and other educational activities for the senior community.

In 2012, BPSOS collaborated with the Camden Children’s Garden and other local non-profit organizations to secure land to develop the Southeast Asian Roots Garden to address food security and community building. The garden project was developed with an intergenerational approach, combining senior wisdom with the vigor and energy of youth. Ms. Quynh Tran, the program manager of the SEA Roots Garden project, believes that the intergenerational garden fits perfectly with BPSOS’s mission of promoting individual and community self-sufficiency. She states, *“Our elders live in the community (of Camden) that is totally different from theirs. Through the garden project, we have given them an opportunity to value and elevate their knowledge, wisdom and skills. Youth have an opportunity to learn and gain from elders’ knowledge. That empowers both groups and leads them to self-sufficiency.”*

Recruitment Strategies

BPSOS staff was successful in recruiting members for their intergenerational garden project because they had already worked with seniors through the Vietnamese Seniors Association of Camden (VSAC) and youth through their youth leadership program. Many of the older Vietnamese had farming skills from their native country and embraced

the idea of a garden project. They formed the SEA Roots Garden Council which assisted in the recruitment of elderly participants. Youth were recruited from different high schools in the area through an application process.

BPSOS was successful in responding to the motivations of each generation during its recruitment process. Ms. Nancy Nguyen, the Branch Manager at BPSOS, believes that the intergenerational activities were appealing to seniors because they wanted to teach young people about their heritage and plants associated with their traditional culture. They also recognized that gardening work is physically hard and that they needed assistance from youth.

Young people were attracted for different reasons. The youth who participated were already involved in community work through BPSOS’s leadership program and saw this as an extension of their community leadership engagement. They were also aware of the stereotypes that Vietnamese seniors have about American urban youth as “lazy” and “trouble makers.” They wanted to change elders’ perception of the younger generation. As Ms. Nguyen states, *“They wanted to prove there are hardworking youth in the community.”* Since employment is extremely hard to find in Camden, stipends were offered for participation.

Overall, the recruitment efforts resulted in securing a total of 30 youth and elders to be involved with the project. Nevertheless, the staff reflected that the recruitment message should have highlighted intergenerational relationship building as a “two-way” learning process. The staff later learned that many participants saw the primary intent of the project as joint physical work at the garden and instruction on farming and cultural history by the elders. Midway through the project, the staff had to reiterate that the major goal was mutual learning and relationship building across generations.



Intergenerational Activities

The Intergenerational Garden

From June through August 2012, elders and youth worked together regularly in the garden. The very hot and dry weather during the summer made the gardening particularly difficult. The project team realized that the logistical work of maintaining the garden required much more time and effort than they had anticipated.

Both youth and elders invested significant physical work in cultivating the land and nurturing plants throughout the summer. Elders with their gardening knowledge demonstrated how to grow plants and youth appreciated their guidance. The young participants, eager to show elders how they can be 'contributors' to the community, continued to work in severe outdoor conditions. One youth participant says that he was able to build trust with elders at the garden. *"I did the heavy lifting of the garden work first."* Recalling his own experience growing up in Georgia at his grandfather's farm, he said *"I wanted to bring life to the garden (for our community)."*

Intergenerational Communication Training

In addition to the garden work, the youth met at BPSOS twice a week for training related to various topics such as food justice, community resiliency and intergenerational tensions. The staff facilitated intergenerational communication training as well as discussions related to post-war trauma. Staff be-

lieves that this helped youth demonstrate patience and respect when interacting with the elders. The elders' participation deepened as they used their knowledge and skills to guide young people as they gardened. During the summer, however, BPSOS faced an internal challenge when the program coordinator appointed to work with elderly left the organization. As a result, elders did not meet regularly outside the garden and carried out the plantings at the garden at their own discretion.

Story Sharing Program

Realizing that more intentional facilitation was needed to promote cross-generational interactions, BPSOS staff, with guidance from the Temple Intergenerational Center, designed an intensive three day story-sharing program in spring 2013. The program included ice breaker activities, presentations, storytelling, and creative writing. All of these activities were conducted in English and Vietnamese.

On the first day, an activity called Peaks and Valleys was used to facilitate the sharing of difficult and happy times in the lives of participants. In pairs, elders and youth examined how similar and different their life experiences were. One pair indicated that they were both abandoned by their parents and grew up without parental support. They said, *"We both had ups and downs but each time we had difficulties, we prevailed."*

On the second day, all participants were asked to

bring an object that reflected their identity. Elders' objects included artifacts from the Vietnam War, old photographs and ancient coins that an elder received from his grandfather. Youth brought items such as trophies from sports tournaments and a digital camera. As they showed the objects, they told stories of their past struggles and how they dealt with adversity in their lives. Through this open sharing, connections significantly deepened. One young person expressed, *"It takes courage to share stories of struggles in the past but we did. On that day, we put down our walls."*

On the third day, they created joint poems and collages of their collective hopes for the future. A youth commented, *"Making a joint poem and a collage....That was symbolic and showed that we can work together. We bridged out lives."* Ms. Nguyen, a lead facilitator of the story-sharing sessions, was amazed how open participants have become. She believes that the in-depth interactions were achieved because of the previous joint labor at the garden. *"For me, the story-sharing series was a litmus test for the shared labor at the garden, the foundation of their relationships was already built through gardening and the sessions complemented it."*

Storytelling activities changed the nature of relationships between elders and youth at the garden. Now elders know each young member's life and interests. They feel more comfortable approaching young people with questions and requests. One youth who bonded with elders through photo sharing during the storytelling session reported that elders now come to her with their old photographs and ask her to digitally scan and enlarge them. She is delighted that elders now rely on her for her technology skills. She said, *"Now I am the person they can open themselves up to....They come to ask for something from me. That never happened before. They were always teachers. They recognize that I have skills to help them."*

Outcomes

Efforts by BPSOS to promote intergenerational relationships have had positive outcomes for youth, elders and the organization. The following describes key impacts on each group.

Impact on youth

Increased empathy toward Vietnamese elderly. The project provided an opportunity for youth to listen to elders' life stories. As a result, youth participants have a deeper understanding and empathy for the Vietnamese elderly. One teen articulated, *"Now I know more about what they went through and are going through. I know why sometimes they can be angry about the ways things are with their lives....Why Vietnamese elders are frustrated when they see youth not taking the school seriously...some never had that educational opportunities like we do."*

Another participant expressed, *"We are the same people but are just in different time-frame. When I saw these photos of elders when they were young, they were like us. I felt he was in my shoes figuring out his life....There is no reason to be afraid of them."*

Increased voice in the Vietnamese community. Prior to the project, young people reported that they often felt disregarded by the seniors in the community. The project opened the door for elders to listen to the voices of young people. One participant articulated, *"Normally, there is no voice for youth in this communitybut I gained a voice through this experience. If these elders can hear my stories and acknowledge my experience, that's the starting point to debunk the general stereotype elders have about us (youth)."*

Increased confidence to overcome challenges. Being listened to by the elders who went through unthinkable tragedy validated youth's life-experience and reinforced their sense of resiliency. One

6 words: Sau chíp
OUR STORY / câu chuyện của tôi

K.V. Không bao giờ quên ơn người cứu mình sống
 L.P. Sahara. Sống sâu nơi Tuyết vôi.
 L.N. Trong chiến tranh, tôi lạc trên biển
 N.L. The caged bird yearns freedom more
 T.P. Phấn đấu không qua số mạng
 K.V. Once in my hole, now out
 T.V. Lịch sử dạy tôi làm những điều
 Nói năng nhỏ nhẹ thật đáng yêu
 Hòa đồng cuộc sống trong thiên hạ.
 Thất bại thành công, ta vẫn theo!
 K.V. Tình yêu, chúng tôi bằng hành động
 không phải lời nói!
 Love, practice action, not words
 J.H. (Coi Trăm Bớt) Diamond of future
 N.N. Trying (effort) → Failure → great Success

OUR HOPE / HY Vọng

L.N. / N.L. Hy vọng chớ và cháu tiếp tục làm việc thật tốt
 K.V. / L.P. Phấn đấu Cố gắng Thử kể Di Sản. Chung chi
 Không Tươi mãi, không già không chết
 Trong Forever young, never old, never dead
 Nhon Nguyen. Failure Destroys.
 and John Heresco hope builds great success
 Thất bại là hủy diệt, hy vọng tạo nên thành công
 Châu Tôn: Yêu tổ quốc, yêu ruộng đồng
 Kiều Love country, love farm/field

youth was inspired by his elderly partner's acknowledgement of his life struggles and said "I used to get angry at my situation but not anymore. If Mr. L who went through that much said I am a strong person, I can overcome a lot of things. I can get things done in any circumstances."

Impact on Elders

Increased respect and empathy for youth. BPSOS members believe that the project helped elders understand the value of listening to youth. Because of the intentional facilitation of empathic listening, the older participants now have a sense of acceptance and admiration for young generations.

Elders articulated their understanding of each young member, "I learned things I did not know through stories. I realized that gambling continues to be such a big problem in the community because it caused one girl's mother to leave her first father."

"I feel like I could not have done what J has done... he does not have a mirror to be shown the right way because he does not know his own parents. But he has been able to succeed especially in sports or in his community development so much. And K, I see that he doesn't say very much but he has a lot of thoughts in his soul...He opened up to me and told me about his father and it's a very difficult situation..."

One elder said now he will pray for the young people and hope that "they will be able to be the best of themselves, so that they can build up our country."

Hope for connecting to younger family members. As a result of inspirational storytelling experience with youth in the project, the elders indicated that they were motivated to go home and talk in the same manner with their children and

grandchildren. All of the elders came to Ms. Tran and said that the story sharing was very meaningful and that they hoped to do it with their own grandchildren or younger family members in the future. They were excited and hopeful at the suggestion that a recording be made of their journey and the possibility of it being transcribed, leaving their stories for younger family members to hear and read for years.

Impact on organization and community

Infusion of intergenerational approaches into other programming. Staff members reported tangible skills gained in this project including improved interpretation and group facilitation skills. They learned that facilitating mixed-age group interactions is complex. It sometimes requires sensitively and respectfully re-directing elders in order to equalize the traditional status differences between ages.

Most importantly, this project inspired the use of intergenerational approaches across other programs. For example, youth, elders and others usually separately plan different components of the Moon Festival, the biggest annual cultural celebration in Camden. Now they see this as an opportunity for relationship building by having all generations plan together and promote the idea of leaving a legacy.

Changes in the nature of intergenerational discourse. For Ms. Tran, the most important project outcome was the way it created “conversations” between youth and elders. She explains the significance of this result for the community. *“In our culture, conversations rarely happen in the family. Communication between parents and children is mainly about parents giving instructions to children, providing one-way directions.”* She believes that this is probably the first time that project participants had a sit-down conversation with members from a different age cohort. Through this project, BPSOS created a space and intentionally

facilitated mutual dialogues.

A sense of urgency to archive elders’ stories emerged from all participants and staff members. As one staff person commented, *“Leaving the legacy is important. This is a critical time – time is passing to capture the elder stories.”*

One youth reported that she sees her grandfather differently. *“I feel this has become more of a necessity.....if I don’t listen to his story, it will be lostIf I can do this with elderly who are not my family, who are unrelated to me, why can’t I do this with my own grandpa?”*

Importance of a shared physical space. Ms. Nguyen believes that the story-sharing activities gave a deeper meaning to the garden as a space to honor the knowledge and resiliency of the community. The success of this project inspires her to *“focus on community assets rather than deficits.”* After the sessions, she heard one elder say he envisions the garden as a school for community members. That is what exactly what she envisioned for the project.

One of the youth’s reflective comments confirms this notion. *“After the sessions, I see the garden and these plants differently. It’s more symbolic. The garden is the place to bridge the gap between elders and youth.....There are roots in these plants and that’s our elders and we are creating a new way of life together.”*

Challenges

Age and gender hierarchy

Although their shared labor at the garden created a rare opportunity for youth and elders to work together, the two groups still faced difficulty connecting at a deeper level due to the traditional Vietnamese hierarchical norms related to intergenerational and gender interactions. The Vietnamese



culture often places male elders at the highest position in the family and the community. All but one of the elderly participants were men—ex-soldiers and generals of the Vietnam War. The majority of the elderly participants initially saw themselves only as teachers to youth, not necessarily learners. Youth just followed their instructions at the garden. However as the youth coordinator stated, “*the hard work youth and staff did at the garden eventually garnered deeper respect from the elders...*”

Hierarchical norms also affected staff relationships with elders. Staff members were younger females, close to the age of the elders’ children. They needed to be particularly sensitive when suggesting to older male community leaders that need to listen and learn from young generations.

Language

Initially it was hoped that a shared place such as a garden that would not require that everyone speak a common language. The staff realized that the assumption that these generations would easily interact with each other and form a bond needed to be re-examined. Significant language differences between youth and elders required that the bilingual staff had to interpret activity instructions and as well as the sharing of detailed information by participants. Although this was time-consuming process, in the end it resulted in increased mutual respect and understanding.

Limited staff capacity

During this year, BPSOS lost a number of staff members. Due to lack of funding, each remaining member carried double or triple workloads and donated their personal time to maintain the garden.

Communicating the objectives and expectations of the project clearly

Strong cultural norms about who can teach and who should learn and internal group dynamics within the senior association significantly impacted participant selection and role expectations. It was initially understood by the senior association that the intergenerational bonding would take place through labor intensive work at the garden. Male elder leaders established a core group to be engaged in the project with this in mind and may have unintentionally excluded participation from older women in the community.

Advice for other organizations

Through piloting an intergenerational garden and storytelling activities, BPSOS gained significant experience in facilitating intergenerational work in the community. The following are suggestions for other organizations trying to incorporate intergenerational strategies into their work.

- Two-way communication across generations



needs to be carefully and intentionally facilitated. Simply having elders and youth in the same space for joint activities does not necessarily facilitate cross-age interaction. Staff needs to be aware of the existing norms of intergenerational interaction in the family and community and challenge the norm to equalize the interactions with sensitivity and respect.

- It is important to communicate clear expectations of the project during the recruitment stage. Do not define the project by the requirements such as number of meetings and participants. Communicating the ultimate goal of the project to all participants is crucial.

- Staff has to have a trusting relationship with both elderly and youth participants before you start the joint project.



EL CENTRO DE ACCIÓN SOCIAL (Pasadena, CA)

Bridging Generations One Story at a Time: Power of Active Listening

“You should never judge a book by its cover. I used to think elder people were boring but they aren’t. They are interesting and their stories are mainly sad...”

—Youth participant

“We must respect their (youth’s) beliefs, if we want them to respect ours”

—Elder participant

Background Information

Latino community in Pasadena, CA

Pasadena is a diverse community comprised of many ethnicities and languages. According to El Centro de Accion Social, Mexican people have resided in the area for generations because the land was originally part of Mexico prior to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. A significant influx of Mexican population to Pasadena occurred during the early and mid-20th century when many working class citizens faced oppression and poverty under the dictatorship of Mexican President Por-

firio Díaz. Approximately 45,000 Latino Americans currently reside in Pasadena, CA and Mexican and other Latino populations continue to migrate for better work and education. Mexican elders typically move to Pasadena to follow their adult children and provide childcare and domestic help for their family.

An increasing number of Mexican-American children and youth are raised by their grandparents because their parents work long hours. Although they may form an initial bonding, as children grow into their teenage years intergenerational tension often arises because of the grandparents’ strict parenting style. Elders lament that their grandchildren communicate through electronics and are always on their cell phone or computer. Although many grandchildren can speak in Spanish, elders feel a significant communication gap between them.

El Centro de Acción Social (El Centro)

El Centro was founded in 1968 by a group of dedicated community leaders who saw an increasing need for basic social services for the growing Spanish-speaking population of the Pasadena community (www.elcentropasadena.org). Today, as a non-profit community-based organization serving a wide range of age groups, El Centro’s mission is to provide opportunities for low-income individuals and families to become fully self-sufficient and productive members of society. They provide culturally and linguistically appropriate programs with a

special emphasis on Spanish-speakers of Pasadena and the greater San Gabriel Valley area. El Centro's youth program provides youth with academic assistance, conflict resolution skill-building, and leadership skill-development. Their Senior Citizens program serves low-income seniors in Northwest Pasadena by offering ESL classes, U.S. Citizenship and health programs to prevent isolation and depression among elderly. Staff have observed that a lack of authentic intergenerational relationships in families prevents elders from attaining self-sufficiency.

"Dependency on younger family members...that's the only way for elders to get their adult children or grandkids' attention.....We have a senior who lives with her daughter and grandkids. She does not watch TV with them, she does not have dinner with them. The only time they talk is when something needs to be translated for her, when she has an important call to make to the doctor's office. That's the only time they have a conversation.

El Centro launched this pilot project with a hope that intergenerational activities would foster cross-age relationships based on mutual respect and eventually help elders and youth obtain a sense of self-sufficiency. The coordinators of the Senior and Youth programs worked together to plan and implement activities.

Recruitment Strategies

El Centro started their participant recruitment by providing a presentation on the project at their existing senior and youth programs. All student and senior candidates interested in the program were asked to submit an interest form. Coordinators met with interested participants separately to discuss expectations and commitment to the program. El Centro was successful in appealing to the motivations of both elders and youth by utilizing different strategies.

For *elders*, the focus on intergenerational relation-

ship building provided hope that they could connect with younger generations at a deeper level. Ms. Cantero, the Coordinator of the Senior Citizens program commented,

"They (elders) feel lonely. They feel that they have no communication with their own family.... they wanted to learn and see what the issue was (the disconnect between youth and elders in the community)"

To recruit *youth*, staff felt it was important to educate young candidates about El Centro's senior program and how it addresses Mexican elders' economic, social and health challenges. Some young people initially expressed a concern that elders' stories are long and boring. Ms. Albares, the Youth Education Coordinator, personalized the elder program by sharing her experience taking care of her own older family members. Connecting issues at a personal level compelled youth to join the effort.

El Centro successfully recruited a total of 15 elders and 15 youth participants ranging in age from 15 through 69.

Intergenerational Activities

Bridging the youth and senior programs at El Centro

Prior to the pilot program, El Centro's senior and youth programs operated at different locations with different structures. The only occasion elders and youth came together was for annual cultural events such as the Day of the Dead. Experienced in working for both programs at El Centro, Ms. Cantero and Ms. Albares believed in the value of bridging the two programs.

Before bringing both groups together, the coordinators met with their individual groups to create a foundation for building mutual respect and understanding. They believed that starting the dialogue within each peer group was important, especially

for youth since some did not know each other. Staff members were aware of the elders' trepidation around direct interaction with youth. As one elder confessed later,

"I was afraid (about a joint meeting).....I don't have a good relationship with my grandkids and I was afraid the same thing would happen with these kids."

After they brought the whole group together for an initial meeting, they rotated meeting locations between the high school where youth regularly meet and the community center where the senior program is hosted. Getting acquainted with each other's 'home' allowed participants' comfort level and sense of openness to increase.

Promoting active listening

Establishing a comfortable space for joint meetings was not enough to bridge the two groups. For many Mexican elders who went through severe economic hardships and deprivation during their childhood, it was hard to understand that young Mexican-Americans have difficulties in their lives. Many seniors also viewed the youth as *children* rather than envisioning them as *leaders* in the project. While valuing the seniors' experience and wisdom, staff made an effort to change the mindset of elders. They constantly re-directed the seniors' thinking from "we are always right" to "we are working together."

At the same time, youth were uncomfortable sharing their experiences because they feared that the seniors might tell their stories to their parents. Some were also concerned that undocumented families could be deported if their stories left the room. Additionally, youth felt overwhelmed when listening to elders who became emotional when they shared their stories.

To deal with the language issues, the staff established a rule against correcting language mistakes, encouraging people to focus just on listening. The issue of confidentiality was taken seriously and the staff facilitated a series of anonymous storytelling.

Each participant wrote down three questions and put them in a bowl. Questions ranged from a simple factual questions such as "Where were you born?" and "When were you born" to more complex ones such as "How did your family cross the border?" and "Can you tell me about the time when you faced a difficult time and how you overcame?" Each picked up a few questions, responded in writing and returned their answers to the bowl anonymously. Participants took turns reading answers aloud. The anonymous storytelling provided an opportunity for youth to discuss topics such as their family's journey to the United States. This theme is core to their lives but they often avoid talking about it because they do not want to be labeled as "illegals." One older woman shared the tragedy of losing her daughter during an earthquake in Nicaragua. Her written story was read by someone else and she later said she would never have been able to share this experience without crying. Having someone read her story meant a great deal to her.

Discovering the shared struggles of isolation

As elders and youth developed their trust through bi-weekly meetings, Ms. Cantero and Ms. Albares continued to encourage story-sharing. Realizing it takes courage to open up, the coordinators decided to share their own life experiences about their family's journey to America, their personal struggles and how they overcame challenges in their lives. Subsequently a few young people stepped up to share their stories and the ice finally broke. Ms. Albares reports that once elders and youth shared their stories, they discovered similarities in their experiences. Many go back and forth from Mexico to Pasadena, feeling confused and isolated. Elders who are reunited with their adult children after years feel that they were thrown into a totally strange environment without understanding the language and culture. Their adult children often are not able to spend time with them due to work and expect them to care for their children until evening. They feel that no one asks them how they are feeling or how they are doing in their new environment.

Youth, too, yearn for a sense of connection. Many of their parents are young and have no time to support them. Although they seek help from their schools, teachers often correct their broken English rather than listen to their problems. According to Ms. Albares, both generations constantly ask themselves “Whom can I ask for help?” They feel they have to find their own way to survive in a new and harsh environment.

In addition to this deep level of story-sharing, El Centro’s intergenerational sessions addressed healthy lifestyles including elders and youth making healthy snacks together and sharing stories of family member’s struggles with chronic diseases and challenges of changing their eating habits.

Field Trip to Olvera Street

Midway through the project, the older adults and youth participated in a field trip to Olvera Street, a historical site which showcases the different photos and artifacts from the Mexican community. Elders took the lead in this field trip by showing youth how to take public transportation to this destination. Many of the youth had never taken a train before and were impressed that it is possible to get to places in Pasadena without a car. They learned how crucial public transportation is for seniors’ independence. Throughout the field trip, students and senior citizens were asked to take pictures of the exhibits and objects that reminded them of their culture. Youth and elders were divided into intergenerational groups and asked to share stories about their lives and families. Being outside of their usual space and seeing the cultural objects, youth and elders opened up to one another without the presence of staff facilitators. Elders recall, “*At the Olvera Street, we were able to interact with the youth without the leadership of Coralito and Pamela.*” The field trip to Olvera Street was a major highlight of El Centro’s intergenerational program because it allowed students and seniors to share their stories outside of their comfort zone. In subsequent meetings, students and seniors brought photographs they had taken during the trip and continued their discussions about cultural heri-

tage. They plan to develop a digital photo book that documents the entire program.

Outcomes

Impact on youth

For youth, the intergenerational project provided an opportunity to understand and empathize with elders’ struggles. The staff believes that the development of empathy skills has had a positive influence on their relationship with their grandparents. For example, connections one participant made with elders in the program led her to re-think her relationship with her grandmother with whom she had constant conflicts. She now believes that connecting with her grandparents is possible. Ms. Albares says, “*She is more open to understand her grandma. She understands why she is that way.*”

One youth reflected and said, “*You should never judge a book by its cover. I used to think elder people were boring but they aren’t. They are interesting and their stories are mainly sad...*” Youth now believe that older people can be open to experience their world and hope to do more field trips to exchange experiences in the ‘old times’ and ‘modern times. “*I would like to visit an old place and learn how the elders used to live...and have old people talk to us about what we see. Also, visit a new modern place so that they can see how time has changed.*”

Impact on elders

Prior to the program, the elders in the program expressed how difficult it was for them to connect with their grandchildren. Many felt that young generations are “spoiled,” “ungrateful” and “disrespectful” Ms. Cantero says, “*They didn’t understand why they (youth) don’t want to go to school when they have an opportunity.*”

With encouragement from the project facilitators, elders learned to connect with younger people by refraining from correcting their Spanish or disre-

garding the challenges youth face in their daily life in America. One elder stressed the importance of mutual respect. *"We must respect their beliefs, if we want them to respect ours."* Active listening made elders more aware of why high school students sometime behave in a disrespectful manner. One participant stated, *"They (youth) care about others but many of them act a certain way because of peer pressure. (They want) to impress others."* By listening to youth, they have learned the reason why some students do not want to go to school. An elder shared, *"Bullying is an issue that we should not take for granted. I didn't understand the term 'bullying' (before) but after my interaction with one of the students, I was so amazed to hear about some of the stuff students go through."*

Ms. Cantero believes that elders' perception that "American kids have it easy" has changed through their participation in the project. She said, *"Everyone thinks 'My life was the hardest.' And yes, our elders have had such struggles but that is not the universal fact. ... Now they see that young people have feelings, they are going through their own hardships and that makes them behave certain way.Now they say, 'Maybe I should just stand back and allow this child to talk to me. That's what they learned, listening to youth's stories. "*

The staff is surprised that the seniors in the project now rarely come to her for her translation as they did at the beginning. She says, *"They are no longer dependent on us. They directly approach youth, no longer need us to be around."*

Impact on the organization

Both Ms. Cantero and Ms. Albares believe that the intergenerational project benefited their existing programs. Youth now believe in the value of El Centro's senior program and told Ms. Cantero that they would volunteer for her program. Some youth felt that many families 'outsource' their caregiving duties to the senior service program and feel that more can be done at home by younger family members.

The staff observed that this year's Day of the Dead celebration was different. Usually, elders take the lead to plan and organize the event youth show up that day to set up the place. This year, there were more interactions during the planning and at the event. After the celebration, they continued to have conversations and share photos.

Ms. Cantero believes that facilitating this project made her more aware of the reason why there is a generational gap in the community. She believes that she now has the ability to bring these two different groups into conversation. She says, *"I learned so much from facilitating activities to bridge them. Now with my experience, I would be able to engage both groups."*

Ms. Cantero and Ms. Albares worked well as a team for the intergenerational project and they say *"we are now more conscious about the power of our joint work. Before, we divided our work like, it was your area, this was my area, now we co-own."* El Centro serves a total of more than 150 youth and 150 seniors. The senior population has become diverse and now they serve Asians and Eastern Europeans as well as Latinos. The staff hopes to expand the intergenerational activities to all El Centro clients.

Challenges

Confidentiality concerns

There was trepidation among youth and their parents that their personal and family stories would not remain confidential.

Lack of confidence in their language skills

Both groups were conscious about their language proficiency (English for elders and Spanish for youth) and felt embarrassed to speak in their 'broken' English or Spanish.

Logistics

Bringing two groups together who have very different schedules was difficult and time intensive.

Several youth and elders were appointed to assist with reminder calls and room set up which helped reduce the work-load for the staff members.

Advice for other organizations

Through this pilot project, El Centro gained significant experience in facilitating intergenerational work in the community. The following are key learnings they want to share with other organizations trying to incorporate intergenerational strategies into their work.

- Connect participants by personalizing recruitment messages. Break the ice by having staff members share their stories with participants.
- Create a safe space where both elders and

youths feel comfortable sharing their experiences. Start the project where participants feel familiar, such as schools and senior centers. Gradually take the participants out of their comfort zone by organizing fieldtrips.

- Invest time for elders and youth to meet regularly. Having more than one meeting a month is important for building meaningful relationships.
- Emphasize mutual learning by promoting a message, “we are working together,” and challenging the traditional norm of intergenerational interaction, “elders are to teach and youth are to learn.”

CONFEDERATION OF SOMALI COMMUNITY OF MINNESOTA

Joint Dialogue: Facilitating Appreciation across Generations

“By involving youth in constructive intergenerational activities, they would gain a greater appreciation of their cultural identity and confidence to succeed.”

—Saeed Fahia, Executive Director, Confederation
of Somali Communities of Minnesota

Background Information

Somali community in Minneapolis, MN

Somali refugees who fled a brutal civil war in their Northeast African nation, at one time colonized by Italy and Britain, started arriving on the shores of the United States at the end of 1991. The war, which is still going on, has brought more than 100,000 Somalis (40,000 of whom have resettled in Minnesota) to the United States. The twin cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul have a total of 30,000 Somalis. Although they benefit from well-established refugee social services in Minneapolis, many Somalis face racial, language and religious discrimination and continue to face significant challenges. Intergenerational conflict is a serious issue in the community. Although many families still maintain strong intergenerational bonds, the traditional deep connections have become frayed due to differing acculturation rates among age groups. Families often have conflicts which sometimes result in legal disputes.

Confederation of Somali Community of Minnesota

The mission of Confederation of Somali Community of Minnesota is to enhance the lives of Somalis in Minnesota by ensuring access to appropriate basic need and self-sufficiency services; uniting all Somali groups residing in Minnesota; preserving Somali traditions and culture; and educating the community-at-large about Somalis (www.csc-mn.org). CSCM fulfills its mission through a

continuum of six distinct programs including: (1) Youth Services, (2) Refugee Settlement Services, (3) Health & Wellness Services, (4) Employment Services, (5) Elder Independence Services, and (6) the East African Women’s Center. In the past, the elder and youth programs worked together through youth drama classes where elders were asked to pair with youth to discuss culture and life in Somalia as well as exchange language skills.

One of the major concerns of the Somali community is the rise in criminal activities among Somali youth. With parents who work long hours and grandparents who may not embrace their Western ways, many Somali youth yearn for a sense of belonging and acceptance. CSCM staff hoped that by involving youth in constructive intergenerational activities, they would gain a greater appreciation of their cultural identity (“Somaliness”) and confidence to succeed.

For this purpose, CSCM wanted to develop a core group of elders who could mentor and support youth.

Recruitment Strategies

CSCM utilized the connections with youth and elders from their existing program to recruit 15 youth and more than 20 elders to participate in the intergenerational pilot project. The youth group had an equal balance of boys and girls. The elder group first started with the majority male participants and later added a few women.

Fatima Hussein, Project Coordinator, was effective in creating targeted recruitment messages for each group. Aware of the disappointment that elderly Somali often feel about their “Americanized” youth, she approached potential candidates with the message, “*You always complain about how our youth are, this is the chance for you to fix the problem.*”

Youth were aware of elders' negative perceptions of them. With this in mind, Ms. Hussein stated to youth candidates, *"This is a chance for you to directly hear from the elders. We will create a space for you to have conversations with elders. This will give you a chance to hear what they have to say."* Both parties embraced the opportunity for direct encounters through the intergenerational project.

Intergenerational Activities

To launch the project, separate meetings were held with elders and youth that provided each group with opportunities to reflect on the nature of intergenerational relationships. Negative emotions were shared among participants — elders felt youth did not demonstrate traditional respect for elders and ignored elders' messages to study hard and refrain from partying at night. They blamed adult children for not providing the discipline needed for their teen age children and for disregarding the role of elders in teaching their cultural and religious values to the next generation. Youth felt that elders' messages were often condescending, expressing that they feel that they are treated like little children. Realizing the tremendous schism that exists between elders and youth, Ms. Hussein conducted a series of separate meetings of youth and elders to prepare them for joint meetings. She developed a set of questions that included: "What do you want youth to appreciate about you? (for elders)" and "What do you want elders to appreciate about you? (to youth)" The participants wrote their responses in preparation for the joint meetings.

Ongoing meetings, held twice a week, were structured to promote sharing and listening. Although there were challenges, over time, youth and elders started sitting together and feeling more comfortable in each other's presence. Elders were deeply fascinated with the issues of generational differences and some stayed after the meeting to continue their discussion. Youth and elders started to see each other outside of the meetings, having tea together at a neighborhood coffee house. They

had clearly begun to gain a deeper understanding of each other.

Unfortunately in early 2013, the Confederation of Somali Community of MN suspended its operations due to a lack of funding. Without a host organization, the project was not able to continue.

Challenges

Communication styles

Somali elders, who are traditionally placed at the highest status in the family and community, often dominate in a discussion. Many youth feel that elders always lecture with their long stories. When they were brought together, the coordinator had to emphasize the importance of listening on both sides.

In addition, Somali elders tend to communicate their ideas and messages through folk tales. In their traditional fables, metaphorical figures carry life lessons intended to help younger generations gain wisdom. To American-born Somalis, the fables that elders share sound like children's stories and some youth feel disrespected. Elders' long, indirect manner of speaking frustrates them as they live in the world of quick, direct, straightforward communication.

Advice for other organizations

CSCM experienced both challenges and successes during the implementation of this pilot project. The following are lessons learned from the Temple Intergenerational Center which provided technical assistance to CSCM.

- Conduct a needs assessment of generation gaps that exist in the community. Understanding what causes the schism between generations and what assumptions organization staff

make about generational gaps in the family and community is crucial before designing the intergenerational activities.

- Existing relationships that the organization has with youth and elders create a fertile ground for starting an intergenerational project. Make sure that the organization facilitating the intergenerational activities has trusting relationships with community members, including youth, elders and their adult children/youth's parents.
- Start the program by facilitating separate meetings with youth and elders. Create a space that validates the experiences and insights of both groups. Promote an appreciation of one another and an understanding each other's strengths.
- Facilitators need to be intentional about how to bridge two generational groups, yet flexible in allowing an organic process to develop.' Unexpected reactions may take the joint dialogue 'off course,' however staff members need to be tolerant of 'detours' they may encounter during their joint journey with youth and elders.
- When introducing a complex and culturally embedded concept such as 'resiliency,' the organizations facilitating story telling needs to have a deep understanding of what the word means to the community or find a culturally relevant term that addresses individual and community strengths.

IV. CONCLUSIONS



The four organizations involved in this initiative are very different in their history, mission and operation. The immigrant and refugee youth and elders they worked with also varied in terms of their culture, language, socio-economic and education level. All of these organizations, however, believed that their efforts to connect young and older generations strengthened families and their communities. Though many of the strategies employed were site specific, a number of common promising practices emerged from the implementation of the inter-generational pilot projects. The following section highlights promising practices, overall benefits and recommendations from staff members who implemented the pilot projects.

Promising Practices

Recruitment

- *Building trusted relationships with community members.* All organizations in the initiative recruited their youth and elder participants by tapping into the relationships they had established through their youth and senior programs. Ethnic-based organizations often have ‘family-like’ relationships with their clients. Many partic-

ipants became involved in this project because staff members they knew reached out to them. Some individuals wanted to give back to the organization which had helped them and their families in the past.

- *Addressing motivators for elders.* The most effective recruitment messages focused on elders’ interest in sharing their interest in sharing their cultural heritage and increasing their understanding of younger generations. This was particularly important to those who felt disconnected from their younger family members.
- *Addressing motivators for youth.* Effective recruitment messages for youth focused on opportunities to listen and learn from elders, debunk elders’ negative stereotypes of youth, produce a joint product, and advocate together with elders on issues of common concern.

Creating meaningful cross-generational interactions

- *Training.* The pilot organizations found that preparing youth and elders in separate groups

before bringing them together helped to successfully launch the project. Basic information about each generation needed to be provided prior to direct interaction. For example, both Cambodian and Vietnamese youth were given an orientation on appropriate ways to communicate with elders, focusing on respect and patience. Elders were encouraged to have more tolerance for youth's Americanized styles and lack of native language fluency.

- *Overcoming language barriers.* The language barrier between generations was a major challenge to facilitating in-depth dialogues. Fun, ice-breaker activities with photographs and pictures were used initially to facilitate interaction. Artifacts and photographs were also used to elicit stories. In addition, staff encouraged participants to listen to each other rather than correct language mistakes. The use of bilingual staff was essential for building connections between the youth and elders.
- *Role of staff.* The staff carefully guided each group as they explored commonalities and differences in their lives. They helped participants recognize each other's struggles and demonstrate empathy. In each project, staff created an environment that promoted confidentiality and mutual trust.
- *Logistics.* Since youth and elders have different schedules and priorities in their lives, the logistics involved in bringing them together was a challenge. Ensuring the buy-in of families and support for transportation was essential for establishing a mutual time and space for groups to meet regularly.
- *Strengths-based approach.* Focusing on the assets and resiliency of each age group rather than their deficits was an effective approach to fostering acceptance and understanding.
- *Sustainability.* The pilot organizations all faced challenges regarding limited funding and hu-

man resources. Integrating intergenerational activities into the overall organizational mission and other programmatic efforts was the key to their success.

Benefits of Intergenerational Activities

- *Internal silo-busting.* The intergenerational project contributed to 'silo busting' within each of the participating organizations. Staff members who coordinated separate senior and youth programs were able to work as a team. They now believe that collaboration across different divisions/programs contributes to their overall organizational mission of strengthening families and community. This approach helped staff and community members think more collectively about addressing challenges faced by the entire community.
- *Building Empathy.* Intergenerational story-sharing sessions helped both youth and elders gain understanding and empathy for one another. With staff's careful facilitation, both elders and youth were able to re-examine stereotypes they had of one another. Many elders realized that youth have knowledge they don't possess and youth became to understand that seniors' frustration with young people grew out of the sacrifices they have made for future generations. Elders' stories answered many questions for youth about their cultural identity. Some youth felt that having elders recognize their struggles in school and within their families validated their experiences. Connections established in the project encouraged many participants to open up cross-generational dialogues at home.
- *Reducing isolation.* Although many of the challenges that participants face are generation specific, elders and youth also discovered common struggles. Due to a lack of time and support from their adult family members, both populations expressed feeling isolated and

‘on their own’ in their families. Many feel that they are invisible and face marginalization in the community. The opportunity to dialogue through intergenerational activities provided a way to jointly address the issue of marginalization. For elders who may be experiencing depression, intergenerational activities provided them with the hope that meaningful connections with younger generations can be established.

- *Preserving Culture.* All participants including staff, youth and seniors expressed the importance of preserving elders’ stories for the community. The intergenerational project made them realize that these stories will be lost forever if they do not make efforts to capture before elders pass away.

Recommendations

- Identify staff members who have in-depth knowledge of intergenerational norms and issues in the community. Ideally, the staff should be from the community; if not, background knowledge has to be built before launching the project.
- Make sure that the organization and the staff members implementing intergenerational activities have a trusting relationship with community members through past services and programming.

- Communicate clear goals and expectations of the project during the recruitment stage. Craft and personalize different recruitment messages for elders and youth that address generational interests and motivations.
- Prepare youth and elder groups separately before beginning collective work. While focusing on ongoing joint meetings, consider holding separate meetings periodically in order to process age-specific issues and obtain feedback on the overall program.
- Carefully establish a safe and comfortable space for open, cross-generational dialogues. Encourage staff members to share their personal stories with program participants as a way to build trust. Staff should be aware of existing norms related to intergenerational interactions in the family and community as well as make efforts to equalize the nature of cross-age interaction with sensitivity and respect.
- Emphasize mutual learning by moving beyond the traditional roles of elders as teachers and youth as learners and promoting the message: “We are working together.”
- Incorporate intergenerational relationship building into ongoing youth and older adult programming so that this lens becomes part of fabric of the community.



