

***We're Still Here* – Stories of Seniors and Social Isolation in Santa Cruz County: A Model for Community Engagement**

IRENE NOLAN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During the October 2017 wildfires in California, Sonoma County experienced firsthand how an engaged and empowered community can support vulnerable populations. How can public agencies continue to engage the community to support programs and services impacting people's lives year-round? The Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History and the Santa Cruz County Human Services Department have developed a collaborative model using community engagement to organize conversations about complex social issues. Presentations of community issue exhibits, such

as *We're Still Here: Stories of Seniors and Social Isolation*, bring attention to issues impacting communities and encourage the public to take action. Without the support of an empathetic and engaged community, social service agencies will not be able to effectively address the multifaceted concerns of a growing population of older adults. Developing a tool like community issue-driven exhibits has the potential to bring awareness to the issues impacting many different vulnerable populations and provide a method for the public to take direct action.

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“The power of art is the power of unsettling surprise.”—Simon Schama¹

Introduction

In October 2017, Sonoma County experienced the most destructive and deadliest wildfire California had seen to that date.² Emergency, Health, and Human Services agencies jumped into action to support the community by providing essential services. Media from across the region, state, and country provided continuous coverage of the fires and the aftermath, bringing attention to the needs of the impacted communities. Along with public agency support, the communities of Sonoma County and surrounding areas stepped forward with an indisputable desire to support and provide help to those affected by the wildfires. This illuminates the clear desire of community members to take direct action to support individuals impacted by large-scale disasters. But public agencies work not only in times of natural disasters but day-to-day to address complex social issues that impact the most vulnerable community members. One of those complex issues impacting vulnerable seniors every day in Sonoma County is the devastating effects of isolation and loneliness. According to Sonoma County demographics, 28% of seniors live alone and 15% of seniors live in geographically isolated areas.³ Although not

a direct measure of loneliness or social isolation, the demographics of seniors living in Sonoma County indicate that there is a high potential that they are experiencing its effects. There are a multitude of studies that draw connections between loneliness and negative physical and mental health outcomes. One study even states that the health impacts of loneliness are worse than that of smoking 15 cigarettes a day.⁴ There is no doubt that loneliness is a “growing epidemic” for senior populations.⁵

The Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History (MAH) has developed a model of engagement to bring together community members, community-based organizations, public agencies, and policy makers in a collaborative effort to bring forward complex social problems through exhibits called “community issue exhibits.” Drawing attention to social issues is not the only goal. The larger goal is to encourage and support community members to engage in social action, small or large. The Santa Cruz County Human Services Department (SCHSD) has been a key collaborative partner with the MAH in developing community issue exhibits and provides a model for how public agencies and organizations with diverse goals can come together for social change.

Background

At the beginning of the companion book to his documentary series *The Power of Art*, Simon Schama

1. Simon Schama, *The Power of Art*, BBC Books and HarperCollins (2006)

2. Cal Fire, Incident Information, Top 20 Most Destructive California Wildfires http://cdfdata.fire.ca.gov/incidents/incidents_statsevents

3. Sonoma County Area Agency on Aging, *The Art of Aging*, The 2016-2020 Area Plan and Community Report, May 2016

4. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/17/world/europe/uk-britain-loneliness.html>

5. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/11/well/mind/how-loneliness-affects-our-health.html>

asks "... but what is art really for?"⁶ Schama is repeating the same question many people dragged through museum exhibition halls have asked. Through their collaborative work, the MAH and SCHSD are attempting to answer this question and ultimately operationalize the power of art. Art has the power to educate. Art has the power to bring communities together. Art can also be a "catalyst for community action on a specific local issue."⁷ The tool of the community issue exhibit cannot be undervalued in a time when government budgets are shrinking and the needs of vulnerable populations only continue to grow.

In 2017, the MAH presented their first community issue exhibit called *Lost Childhoods: Voices of Santa Cruz County Foster Youth and the Foster Youth Museum*. This exhibit focused on issues faced by transition-age foster youth, between 18 and 25 years old. It was made up of art, artifacts, and stories from and created by former foster youth. The development of *Lost Childhoods* was driven by a collaborative process facilitated by the MAH with participation from former foster youth, community groups, and SCHSD. The exhibit ran for six months and received over 70,000 visitors.⁸

Uniquely, the exhibit was designed to encourage visitors to take action through the use of action cards in the Take Action Center. As a result of the *Lost Childhoods* exhibit, community members took direct tangible action by becoming CASA volunteers, donating bikes, jackets, socks, baking birthday cakes, renting rooms or providing lodging to youth, and helping youth develop job interview skills.⁹ The positive media attention and individual actions prompted by the exhibit led the MAH and key partner SCHSD to recognize the power this format had

for driving community engagement and involvement toward social action. SCHSD Director Ellen Timberlake described the exhibit as "the most powerful community engagement tool we've ever seen in raising awareness and opening hearts on complex social issues."¹⁰

Building on the strength of the *Lost Childhoods* exhibit and its effectiveness at influencing and impacting the community, *We're Still Here: Stories of Seniors and Social Isolation* was developed by the MAH in collaboration with the Creative Community Committee (C3), a leadership network developed by the MAH, SCHSD, and other community partners. The project is senior-driven, engaging those experiencing loneliness and isolation at all stages of the exhibit development. Through this process the MAH, C3 and their partners developed "5 Big Ideas" or goals for visitors to the exhibit:

- Visitors will understand the diverse causes and impacts of loneliness on seniors.
- Visitors will build empathy by experiencing what loneliness and isolation feels like for seniors.
- Visitors will honor and learn from the wisdom of culturally-diverse seniors.
- Visitors will build a collective vision of a connected, inclusive, inter-generational future in Santa Cruz County.
- Visitors will take action beyond the exhibition to end senior isolation.¹¹

The exhibit consists of a collection of interactive art installations commissioned from local artists and art created by seniors in Santa Cruz County. *The Game of Life*, by Ry Faraola, gets at the first Big Idea by asking the viewer to confront decisions seniors must make every day about what is important and essential and which things due to a limited income have to be given up like transportation and social activities.

6. Simon Schama, *The Power of Art*, BBC Books and HarperCollins (2006)

7. Lauren Benetua, Nina Simon, and Stacey Marie Garcia (September, 2018) *Community Issue Exhibition Toolkit*, published by Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History <https://santacruzmah.imgix.net/uploads/Community-Issue-Exhibition-Toolkit-FINAL.pdf>

8. Santa Cruz MAH, C3 Impact & Press *Lost Childhoods* <https://c3.santacruzmah.org/impact-and-press/>

9. Santa Cruz MAH, C3 Impact & Press *Lost Childhoods* <https://c3.santacruzmah.org/impact-and-press/>

10. Lauren Benetua, Nina Simon, and Stacey Marie Garcia (September, 2018) *Community Issue Exhibition Toolkit*, published by Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History <https://santacruzmah.imgix.net/uploads/Community-Issue-Exhibition-Toolkit-FINAL.pdf>

11. <https://santacruzmah.org/blog/were-still-here-the-big-ideas>

A photographic collection, *Beyond the Portrait* by Gina Orlando, explores the second Big Idea. She hands the camera lens to her subjects to take images from their own life showing the impact of immigration, disabilities, homelessness, and health concerns in seniors' lives. The images from the private lives of Orlando's subjects allow the viewer to experience what loneliness is like. The many different ways that loneliness is represented also reflects the complex nature of this social issue.

Words of Wisdom, by Wes Modes, drives home the third Big Idea by inviting the visitor to sit down and pick up the clunky receiver of one of seven old rotary and touchtone telephones and listen to the stories collected from seniors living in Santa Cruz County. They retell stories from their childhood, what it is like to be alone, and the importance of staying connected with a social group and younger people.

The *Community Quilt Project*, supported by the Pajaro Valley Quilting Association, engages the visitor in the fourth Big Idea. It asks the visitor to create a quilt square, providing an opportunity to become part of a collective vision of a connected and intergenerational community.

Finally, the exhibit does not just explore the stories of seniors experiencing loneliness or isolation, nor just bring the visitor to a point of empathy, but it asks the visitor to take direct action through the use of action cards in the Take Action Center, the fifth Big Idea. The Take Action Center offers a wide variety of tangible things visitors can do to support seniors in their community, from donating to senior support programs, leading a writing group, volunteering at a LGBTQ+ senior luncheon, or driving a senior to go shopping. Action cards are the size of business card and have contact information for individuals and agencies to help direct visitors to take action. Visitors come away from the exhibit feeling not only compassion and empathy for the experience of seniors, but also with the name, phone number, and email of someone who can help them take tangible steps to support seniors in the community.

Collaboration and Community Engagement

The model developed by the MAH and supported by SCHSD for collaboration and community engagement reaches the public in a novel and authentic way. The collaboration was driven by leadership from Ellen Timberlake, Director of SCHSD, and Nina Simon, the former Executive Director of the MAH, thinking intentionally about a new way to conduct social engagement. Mike McConnell, Director of Adult and Long Term Care for SCHSD, has explained that social service agencies must operate under a veil of confidentiality, which limits the abilities of such agencies to engage the public about the experiences of their clients and where they live.¹² The collaboration with the MAH allows SCHSD to help focus attention on some of the issues also impacting their clients, and allows both vulnerable seniors and engaged seniors to drive the conversation by speaking about their own experiences.

This model of collaboration does not just inform and engage the community at large; it also enriches the lives of seniors engaged in the project. Diane, 71, participated in the C3 planning process and felt inspired to improve her own wellbeing. She is featured in *Beyond the Portrait* and said, "I'm finally doing something for me and my heart has gotten so big. The first thing I will do when I recover from knee surgery is put on a dress and dance. I haven't danced or worn a dress in years."

Considering the attention and outpouring of support as a result of *Lost Childhoods*, Mike McConnell is hopeful that *We're Still Here* will generate a similar response. He expects a possible increase in people enrolling to be In-Home Supportive Services care providers and an increase in volunteers for non-profit groups that serve seniors like Meals on Wheels and Grey Bears. Ultimately, the greater and long-term outcome will be increased community engagement on issues faced by seniors. McConnell foresees a core group of people from the exhibit planning committee will continue to inform

12. Interview with Mike McConnell, Director of Adult and Long Term Care for Santa Cruz County Human Services Department, March 22, 2019

and drive senior involvement after the exhibit closes. The lasting benefit of the planning committee will be to continue improving relationships with senior service organizations and with those who access services. Increased engagement on these problems means more support for policy makers and community leaders to develop policies addressing the issues of the growing population of seniors in Santa Cruz County, policies like one expected to go before the Santa Cruz Board of Supervisors in August 2019 to make Santa Cruz County an Age Friendly Community.

For SCHSD, the direct benefits of partnering with the MAH on community issue exhibits cannot be easily measured. Social services agencies work to help provide people with safety net services; in order to effectively sustain the benefit of these services, agencies must engage with communities. Research studies have shown that “loneliness can impair health by raising levels of stress hormones and increasing inflammation. The damage can be widespread, affecting every bodily system and brain function.”¹³ The effects of loneliness have impacts on the health of entire communities. Through education and engagement on the issues faced by isolated and lonely seniors, Santa Cruz County has the potential to develop more opportunities for prevention, including fewer calls for emergency interventions like Adult Protective Services, and less recidivism for seniors already accessing services.

Recommendation

The Sonoma County Human Services Adult and Aging Division already has a tradition of supporting the arts. In May 2019, Adult and Aging will be presenting the 22nd annual Senior Art Show: *The Art of Aging*. Sonoma County has an opportunity to build off of this successful annual event to develop partnerships with local museums, like the Museum of Sonoma County or the Sonoma Valley Museum of Art, to bring *We’re Still Here* to Sonoma County. Following the model provided by SCHSD and the

MAH, and detailed in their Community Issue Exhibition Toolkit, Sonoma County would have the chance to engage local seniors and advocacy groups and involve local artists in tailoring the exhibit to represent the local experience of seniors facing loneliness and isolation. The MAH exhibit is available for loan by another institution between October 14, 2019 and December 21, 2021, for a run of between three months to nine months. In order to bring the exhibit to Sonoma County, funding of \$30,000 to \$50,000 must be found.¹⁴ Funding for the exhibit would be a one-time budget allocation and is not required to continue into subsequent fiscal years. However, should a program of developing and producing community issue-driven exhibits with a local partner be successful in Sonoma County, there may be a need to consider allocating funding for future projects.

In order to produce a successful issue-driven exhibit, Sonoma County will need to foster a relationship with a key community engagement partner. This partner must be willing to engage with local seniors, their care providers, senior advocates, museums, artists, and public agencies. This will provide a mechanism for community members and members of vulnerable groups to interact and engage with policy makers and to develop the project into one which speaks to the experience of seniors in Sonoma County. Sonoma County Human Services may consider partnering with the Youth and Senior Coordinator at the Sonoma County Library and the Aging Together committee who are already engaged in conversation about intergenerational communities.¹⁵

Action Steps

The Adult and Aging Senior Art Show Committee should be encouraged to develop an action center for the annual Senior Art Show, similar to the MAH’s Take Action Center. Visitors to the art show will be

13. <https://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/05/13/shaking-off-loneliness>

14. *We’re Still Here – Stories of Seniors & Social Isolation*, Exhibition Rental Information, available from Stacey Marie Garcia, Director of Community Engagement, Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History, Stacey@santacruzmah.org

15. Interview with Tracy Repp, Manager of the Sonoma County Area Agency on Aging, April 19, 2019

provided information about ways they can volunteer and support seniors in Sonoma County. It will be important to develop relationships with groups already engaging with the community on issues faced by seniors, like the Sonoma County Library *Together at the Table* series, the Aging Together Committee, along with local art institutions. It will also be vital to use the experience of the Human Services, Planning, Research, Evaluation, and Engagement Division to define an ongoing process for this type of community engagement. In the meantime, Sonoma County Human Services Department can support the concept of community issue exhibits by bringing the MAH's *We're Still Here* exhibit to Sonoma County by doing the following:

- Locate one-time funding of \$30,000 to \$50,000.
- Locate a museum or museum quality exhibition space to present *We're Still Here* for a three- to nine-month run.
- Locate a collaborative partner to take on the work of community engagement coordinator in developing the exhibit locally.

By taking these steps, Sonoma County Human Services would be making a move toward transforming the power of art into community action.

Conclusion

During the wildfires, Sonoma County experienced the outpouring of help from engaged individuals in times of great need, as have many other communities across California impacted by recent natural disasters. It is clear that people want to help their community, but they just do not know how. Social service agencies meet the safety net needs of the population, yet vulnerable populations often have more needs that cannot be completely met by public programs. Sonoma County is projected to have

an over 60 population of 161,001 by 2030, with this growing population of older adults, social services will need to begin leveraging community support in a sustainable way.¹⁶ Six months, one year, and even ten years from now, the needs of older adults in our community will not have gone away but will likely have increased. Sonoma County must intentionally engage the community on the issues that seniors face and mobilize community support into action. Bringing the *We're Still Here* exhibit to Sonoma County would be a powerful way to engage in conversation about the experience of seniors in the community and to encourage action. Developing this exhibit for Sonoma County would present an opportunity to create partnerships for future engagement with the community on the issues that matter most.

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16. Sonoma County Area Agency on Aging, *The Art of Aging*, The 2016-2020 Area Plan and Community Report, May 2016