



VAN FORUM NOTES

The Power of Association

July 12, 2005

Fridley Community Center

July 12, 2005 Sharon Anderson facilitated a VAN Forum on The Power of Working With People (The Power of Association) hosted by the Fridley Senior Programs staff.

Sharon started the stimulating forum by conducting a round robin asking participants about team building experiences. Specifically Sharon grounded the discussion around “Remember times when you worked in a group and $1+1=3$ and other times when you worked in a group and $1+1=-2$.”

Examples of team building experiences included:

- Unity symbol – a hand carved carousel horse by a group of older adults.
- Needlework group that rallied around a magazine to vote to win a quilt
- Working together with like-mission organization (meals on wheels and food shelf delivering fresh produce to isolated seniors).
- Working together to preserve a neighborhood from development.
- Focus survey for future planning to upgrade the City of Golden Valley.
- Getting involved in the 2004 political campaign – synergistic affect of calling people, organized chaos and mobilizing people.
- Art group bringing together creative minds.
- Gardening club that volunteered to help the library with flowers and beautifying the community.
- Family reunion cousins that didn't know one another all that much came together to plan a family reunion that has been going on now for 30 years.
- Introduction of sexual abuse into curriculum and saw the presentation of *Touch* and the parents advocated and sought funding for Illusion Theater, the result of the presentation was finding a case of sexual abuse.
- Elders Counseling Elders partnering with the University of Minnesota to show the effectiveness of the program and interventions – a community of clients and counselors was created.
- Hospice program through Jewish Family Services creates a community of support.
- Member of the Longfellow Park Board and instrumental to expand the Park Building included meetings with the citizens and logistics and fine details.
- Advocacy Leadership in Vital Aging certificate program facilitates accomplishments on a daily basis and it resulted in a change of life.

- Anything done since retired, choices are different now than when employed – people need to be committed to the goals – doesn't have to be simple or short-term projects, just important personally.
- United Way campaign partnerships when moving from cohort to cohort of donation coordinators – they were united around something positive and were able to meld together.
- Living at Home/Block Nurse Program partnership with Macalester College for home maintenance program – a collaborate that was hesitant initially, but now a great program.
- Book published and a pre-publication brainstorming party with friends and now a marketing group was created – something written has a life of its own
- East side of St. Paul is changing and growing to include large Hispanic and Hmong populations. A religious organization became a 501c3 which was created to develop a Living at Home/Block Nurse Program to work with elders in the community. The program utilizes students from area schools that may be first generation Americans or immigrants themselves. The program has blossomed successfully.
- Volunteer experience with neurofibromatosis and an organization designed to support individuals diagnosed with the disease. The organization was nearly defunct and core people came together to revive the organization.
- Social worker in the 70s that was part of a team that worked to design a child protective service system – cross disciplines with a commitment to communicate and learn / unlearn.
- Spirituality and inter-faith community called Spirit United with a membership of 50-60 people.
- In the high schools collage of images of students and the successes (they did not have students in high school at the time) showing positive role models.
- Getting my Ph.D. and sometimes getting my committee to agree is like herding stray cats – I keep in mind their support of my success, the power of knowledge, opinion and compromise.

Common themes include caring deeply about the topic or need for action / change. Things that sparked were an idea, need for clarity, and passion or excitement. We want to be part of the movement to facilitate initiatives around vital aging.

Guests included programs connected through VAN and the Advocacy Leadership in Vital Aging Certificate Program (ALVA), sponsored by the University of Minnesota College of Continuing Education, the Vital Aging Network and program partners. Projects included:

Environmental Advocacy: A Vital Force Team

Mark Skeie
Mary Kowalski
Colleen Fritsch

How did you get together?

At a VAN forum, Chuck Dayton spoke about global warming and the dire consequences of what is occurring around the environment. At the end of the meeting there was a discussion about the future; the result was the formation of a committee with Mary taking a leadership role. DARTS volunteered to provide support to the committee. Collaboratively, missions were formed which included education to the public. Older adults were found key to education. The vision was constantly reshaped to create a structure to allow individuals to have a voice and input. The resulting work formed a network rather than another organization among the other score of environmental organizations in Minnesota.

What have you done?

An action oriented conference (For the Good of the Earth: Mother Earth meets Father Time) was held at the Minnesota Wildlife Center in Bloomington (donated space). There were many times when the team came together and stalled in awe regarding environmental issues which seemed overpowering. As a team they divided the environment into air, water and education. The six that were linked with a common passion brought together 60 people at the conference that had similar concerns. The conference developed groups on particular topics.

What's ahead?

Three follow-on groups that were formed from the conference on air, water and education are now their own networks. In October the networks will be brought into the original group. The networks work individually to meet the needs identified and continue to connect with other environmental organizations. The group continues to grow and keeps going. There are people sitting in their homes who are wondering what they can do about global warming – they may be interested, but are not sure how to be interested or don't have the level of awareness or the invitation to join. People care what is going on in their own neighborhood – what is the legacy we are going to leave to our grandchildren? We have to take action not leave it to others.

What have you learned?

If there isn't some continuity or sustainability through its own energy, then we don't need to do it. At the beginning the committee had grandiose ideas that were scaled back based on the need identified. The main connection is through the Internet and frequent updates. Getting organization and staying focused also involves having fun (keep it positive), you don't want to make it painful for volunteers. Continue to focus on common goals and objectives and continually remind one another why you're here and why you continue. You may not be able to solve the problem, but you can make a difference.

Questions / Comments:

A theme seemed to be flexibility, willingness to let go and focus on what was needed. In the group there was organization through leadership, but a diffused mission.

To get involved or to learn more about the environmental groups email mjkoalski@earthlink.net.

Minnesota Creative Arts & Aging Network

Karen Riesett
Kerry Stone
Pat Samples

Pat started out with Ah-ha-ah energy song. The song involved all forum participants. Half of the group provided a high chord while half provided a lower chord. The chords blended together at the end in harmony.

How did you get together?

In 2003 Susan Pearlstein was the executive director for the national Creative Arts and Aging Network. She received an endowment to expand and create local arts and aging networks. She traveled to Minnesota to meet with a group of artists and organizers. The group was inspired to create an affiliate organization. Karen Riesett was in the ALVA program and was looking for a field project and had several familial connections with art. Karen met with Susan in New York City. From that, individuals were invited to meetings around arts and aging. Creative people are right brained...brainstorming occurred and Sharon Anderson volunteered to help with the implementation and strategic planning. MNCAAN designed a strategy with a design team that is not only the "Board" but also the implementers. Interest areas were developed at the facilitated strategic meeting and then work groups were formed around interest areas outside the monthly meetings. Part of being a national affiliate they were required to be a resource, put on a local event on arts and aging, and attend one national Board meeting.

What have you done?

MNCAAN created an "Event" rather than a conference, that was highly participatory. It was a Town Hall Event, there was no budget and the group only had their energies. The City of Bloomington hosted the event at their Arts Center. The Design Team started to call people to see who was doing arts and aging. Many organizations came forward and were asked if they would share their ideas. Participants at the Event had connections to arts and aging but came from various organizations or as individuals. Hands on projects provided stations and interactive models to learn about how arts and aging can be implemented. Still no budget, but projects continue because people are energized and "fired." City Passport, a senior center in St. Paul's Galtier Plaza (partnership with City of St. Paul and HealthEast Care System) was opened and MNCAAN is based out of the site. It is close to the lowertown artist community – a model site for MNCAAN is being developed to showcase art and aging – HealthEast is providing grant writing support.

What's ahead?

Grants have been submitted to foundations and organizations to support paying for arts and artists who work with older adults. Four projects are supported in Minnesota to work with older adults and a panel will be chosen to represent Minnesota in DC. In 2006 another "Event" will be held. A website is being created to support MNCAAN to strengthen the connections between artists, professionals and older adults and the arts. MNCAAN is looking to become a VAN Venture – a way to ascribe to VAN's philosophical mission, however maintaining the focus of arts and aging. MNCAAN will receive various types of support from VAN including volunteers, partnerships, publicity, etc.

What have you learned?

The power of email communications in organizing. The Internet was a resource as well in connecting nationally. The technology took care of communication issues. It included phone conference calls (freeconferencecalls.com). Keep moving...sometimes it looked the train was coming to a halt, but you just keep going. You wonder how you are going to continue and someone or something comes along and it keeps going. Celebrate the spirit is another thing to learn and that everyone no matter the age has the right to express creativity. Each person that participates has skill and ability that can bring to the table. Involve other people – this makes things grow and keeps things going. Practically speaking, banks don't recognize informal groups (as shown when registration was given to MNCAAN). MNCAAN members found creative solutions to barriers they came upon.

Questions / Comments:

The other panels that are not selected for the Washington DC judging will be featured at the Minnesota Aging & Disabilities Odyssey and will showcase the art. They will also be showcased at next year's Event.

More information can be obtained from MNCAAN@yahoo.com.

Twin Cities Gray Panthers

Orell Jensen (oldest member)
Sindy Mau (youngest member)

Gray Panthers is an intergenerational social justice group that was started by Maggie Kuhn. Kuhn had experienced a forced retirement and became involved to form the national organization. The Twin Cities Gray Panthers gets together once a month to discuss policy topics including financial security, health care and other interests. Ageism is the major focus of the group. Gray Panthers believes that Ageism needs to be eliminated. Ageism is bigotry not only experience by older adults, but is pervasive across the lifespan from birth to death (terrible twos, not allowing more than two teens alone in a mall, cards for "over the hill").

Gray Panthers created the *Ripening: Thoughts on Aging and Ageism* video (will be shown August 18th 10:30-12 at the Wilder Foundation) centered on ageism at

work...it's more serious than you think. The video interviews individuals who have experienced ageism and allows them to tell the story. It focuses on how social services can combat ageism and how our own ageist beliefs reflects on our clients we serve. Video guides are going to be put together for organizations. It is \$25 for the video and the guide.

Gray Panthers continues to do education and meetings are spent talking about aging and ageism.

An exercise was led with the VAN forum group introduced themselves and gave their age. The exercise was meant to bring to the consciousness our own ages and the ages of other. It links the attitudes and habits an individual has regarding age including misconceptions.

Gray Panthers participation is connected to Universal Health Care Action Association, a group that advocates for universal health care.

One of the Gray Panthers (Ann Gerike) wrote "Old is Not a Four Letter Word." It uses cartoons to describe the losses that occur as we age. One example is "loss of good looks" where it confronts stereotypical loss – it is a change, looks are not capable of being lost.

"It doesn't suck to be old." Cindy stressed that it is actually the phenomenon of not being healthy that isn't great. Young people who aren't healthy find it "sucks too." You don't "feel old" you "feel tired." We don't get forgetful because we are old, we just seem to attribute it to old age.

Individuals can join Gray Panthers at www.graypantherstwincities.org

Questions:

Have you dealt with language which appears a big obstacle to overcome if we are going to change images and impressions of the process? Even the world old versus older is difficult. They are subjective terms. You get to choose the term not others. There are cultural implications relating to language as well. There is imagery that goes with language as we address "target audiences."

Sharon ended by saying that she heard that what the groups have done is hard work and takes energy. It is not bad, just hard. Themes that emerged included:

- Engagement
- Mobilization
- Networking
- Working with the community
- Talking and communicating
- Give it away – inclusiveness and openness

On behalf of VAN Sharon thanked participants and guests.