

# Older people need art too

*They make small performance  
pieces around the state*

By Judith Monachina

"The arts can be a conduit for profound growth and replenishment," say organizers of a new program run out of the Massachusetts Cultural Council, The Elder Initiative.

For people who live in nursing homes, who may have medical or social needs beyond which they can provide themselves, replenishment might be hard to come by. So when Peter DiMuro and Thomas Dwyer came to several area nursing and health care facilities last week — including one afternoon at Kimball Farms — to lead elders around the lake in a canoe and up the river in a paddle boat, and then out walzing and finally for a collective songwriting experience, all within the walls of their nursing home, the replenishment seemed welcome.

Continued on page 7



PHOTO BY JUDITH MONACHINA



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PHOTOS BY JUDITH MONACHINA

Elders, artists and caregivers in the Kimball Farms workshop as part of a week long program in Berkshire County.

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Continued from page 1

DiMuro and Dwyer are both members of the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, an intergenerational dance company based in Washington, D.C. DiMuro is also founder and director of his own Boston-based company, Peter DiMuro Performance Associates. Both artists are working for an eight-week period for the Massachusetts Cultural Council.

A real void existed in community training for care givers and others who work with or who might want to work with elders, said DiMuro of the council's decision to launch The Elder Initiative. So the council hired DiMuro and Dwyer, himself an elder, to go on the road for eight weeks to several statewide locations, and run week-long workshops for artists and care givers. The workshops are designed to help participants develop "tools" that they can use in their work with elder clients.

Then, as on Thursday afternoon at the Kimball Farms retirement and nursing care facility in Lenox, the participants in the week-long workshop went with DiMuro and Dwyer to watch the two in action and to interact directly with the people who live in nursing homes. Of course, for people who work at nursing homes, the experience of being with elders wasn't the new part, but the new ideas could potentially invigorate their old jobs.

For Dawn Lane, a local choreographer and dancer who works in many community settings teaching dance and movement, this was a way to learn about working with elders. She had not worked with groups of elders before, so the experience was helpful, she said. In the spring of this year she'd received a fellowship to work with the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange in Washington D.C. on a school project.

Lane was sitting in the large circle of about 40 people, mostly elders, with about eight care givers and artists interspersed in the dining hall of Kimball Farms. The tables had been cleared, and the circle was open with DiMuro and Dwyer in the center, alternately leading exercises.

The session began as what seemed to be an ordinary activities session one comes to expect in a nursing home, with greeting activities and warm-ups. Since many of the elder participants used wheelchairs and had impaired mobility, most of the physical motion was using arms, head and feet.

After the warm ups they started "paddling" in a canoe, led by Dwyer, along nearby Laurel Lake. They sang songs as they "canoeed," prompted by participant responses to Dwyer's questions. He asked one woman, "What is your favorite music?" to which she replied, "The waltz." They sang and rowed as they were magically lifted to the Blue Danube.

They made the shapes of nearby mountains with their arms, and this became the second piece of a dance, with the waltz arm position being the first.

"What's your favorite day?" he asked another woman. May Day, she said. What did you do on May Day? We would dance around the maypole. The dance now included drap-

ing streamers around a maypole. And when Dwyer brought participants to October's falling leaves, which one woman motioned with her arms, floating leaves became part of the dance.

The elders had collectively made up a dance, and then it was put to a poem by Dwyer and performed all together. Within an hour, seemingly effortlessly, something was created.

A few of the elders who were invited to attend the workshop were clearly unimpressed with the idea of another activities program. A few walked into the room and then walked out; a few others stood around the edges and watched, smilingly and approvingly and saying how these things help some people, and isn't that wonderful? Imagine having a two strangers with eight other strangers walk into your living room and start telling you to make the shape of a nearby mountain with your arms.

But whether it's just moving the body or the fact that the men are helping people tap the good memories and feel the bittersweet reality of life as the warm sun fills the dining room in which they are all assembled, most people seemed to respond happily, or least not unhappily. Even those who had walked in reluctantly eventually participated; one woman did so inadvertently by spontaneously making the shape of a tree, and before she knew it, it was the tree everyone was making with their arms.

The Cultural Council program is state-funded, with some assistance from the Mass. Extended Care Federation. It will travel to eight communities, in its first phase, after which a culminating week in January will give participants a chance to share feedback, and then a second phase will probably begin, said Cultural Council Executive Director Mary Kelley.

She said the impetus behind the Elder Initiative was previous discussions about art and access. "We were talking about access and all



the citizens, and what does that mean," she said. The council had supported many youth programs, but not any specifically for elders.

Kelley knew DiMuro because as a Liz Lerman dancer he's conducted a training at her previous workplace in New Hampshire. When she learned that he had moved part-time back to his home state of Massachusetts, she decided to approach him before he got too busy with his new company.

Care givers are placed in groups with artists because the two can learn from each other, she

said. Artists benefit because they learn the challenges of the daily work, especially the logistics and constraints; care givers benefit because they get new ideas to bring back to their daily work, said Kelley.

The first phase of The Elder Initiative budget is under \$50,000, with donations of space by the participating facilities, and Jacob's Pillow housing the visitors at a very low cost, she said.