

TELLINGSTORY

The Art of Aging: Finding One's Inner Artist in the Golden Years

Alan standing alongside his car the same year he was born.

As adults we tend to blaze through life. We get busy raising families, establishing careers, and setting up homes, and we only really get to focus on our own interests and hobbies in the slivers of time we eek out in between. Then, when we move on to that next stage in life – our retirement, or the “golden years” – that free time the younger us always wished for comes in huge amounts and remains for all the wonderful years to come.

Sometimes it can actually be daunting – a challenge to find interesting, fun, and active ways to keep those years truly golden. Alan Baker, retired CPA, credits the JCC for helping him accomplish just that, as at 86, he discovered his inner artist while attending the Kaplen Adult Reach Center (ARC) at the JCC.

Understanding this need within our community, the JCC has been continually expanding its senior programming to include special interest clubs – everything from cooking and photography to virtual travel and art and music appreciation – that encourage its participants to discover new passions. And the results, for people like Alan, have been remarkable. As he shares,

“My work as an accountant was pretty cut and dry and it never crossed my mind that I had any creative talent at all. But when Judi, the senior program director, encouraged me to join the photography club, it opened a whole new world for me. I began to see everything with new eyes. Rebecca, the fabulous woman who teaches the class, is a total inspiration. Every week, she sets up new props and compositions for us to photograph and taking pictures became the high point of my week. I began to see things in fabulous new ways and she made me feel great about myself and my work.”



“ For one class, we went outdoors and studied the rain on leaves, and I took a photo that really captured something. It made me proud, and later, I was told it was going to be featured in a senior art exhibit in the JCC Waltuch Gallery. I can’t tell you how thrilled I was to be part of that show and to see my piece on public display. It’s now hanging in my home and when my wife Nanette looks at it and tells me I’m really an artist, there is no better feeling in the world.”

Looking to further explore his newfound talents, Alan joined additional clubs and now waits at his door each morning for the JCC transport to come get him and bring him to his programs. He takes a jewelry making class, where he fashions bracelets and necklaces to present to his wife as gifts. He’s joined the ceramics class, where he makes bowls and vases to display at home or to give to his children. And he’s joined the *Travel the Globe* club, which stirs happy memories of all the places he and his wife have vacationed over the years. He feels happy and engaged and never wants to miss a day.

“ As people age and begin to lose some of their cognitive ability, they often feel a lack of purpose and become depressed,” explains JCC Senior Director Judi Nahary. **“And that’s precisely why we launched these clubs as part of our ARC program. We want to assure our participants that these life changes don’t need to translate to a loss of identity. We want to give them the chance to explore and master new skills - to push themselves outside their comfort zones - and every day, we see members like Alan discover a whole new zest for life. It’s truly amazing to witness.”**

“What we’ve learned over years of experience is that art is a powerful motivator. It allows people to live in the moment and create, and this is especially valuable for seniors. It invigorates them and keeps them from dwelling on negative thoughts and feelings. People like Alan are positive proof that art definitely contributes to a more gratifying senior life.”

In addition to the clubs, ARC also looks to encourage social interaction as a way to keep seniors engaged and interested in life. For a shy person like Alan, this did not come easily at first. But as he began thriving in his art classes and sharing his experiences with others in his group, he began to really enjoy the social interaction it generated and it has dramatically enhanced his overall well-being.

“I was never a very social person,” says Alan. “In fact, I’m pretty private - definitely not the type who easily strikes up conversations with strangers. But my friends in ARC, and the amazing people who run the program, have become like family. And the JCC is always buzzing with activity. For the first time in my life, I can honestly say how much I’ve come to love both giving and getting attention. It’s a whole new experience and it’s done wonders for my personality. I’m more outgoing and cheerful in my 80s than I ever was as a young man, and I never realized till now how much I actually have to say and share. The ARC program has drawn me out in ways I never thought possible and Nanette is just thrilled by the change she sees in me.”

Alan enjoys many other things about ARC as well. He loves the fact that it takes place in a vibrant community center that provides transportation, hot nutritious meals, and a kind, experienced and compassionate staff that is so dedicated to working with aging seniors. He also loves the shows, concerts, holiday celebrations and the chance he gets to engage with young children who attend the JCC nursery school. But it’s the art programs and the human connections he’s made that have transformed him in ways neither he nor his wife ever fathomed.

“Nanette and I have been married for 65 years,” says Alan. “We recently gave up our home in Old Tappan, where we lived for 46 years, and moved to a high rise in Fort Lee. It was a difficult transition, because owning that home and raising our children there was a dream. But that terrible feeling of isolation I was experiencing after the move disappeared the moment we found the JCC. It’s given me a whole new life - something meaningful to look forward to every day. And most importantly, it has helped me learn new things about myself, which has made me a new and happier person.

“I was recently sick and missed a whole week of ARC, and it made me realize how much I have come to depend on it for my own well-being. When I returned, everyone made such a big fuss over me the second I entered the room. And you know what? I loved the attention! There’s no greater feeling than to know there are people who care for you and think about you. It’s not something I’m used to, but it makes me happier than I have the words to express, and I’m so grateful to the JCC for bringing these new passions and such warm companionship into my life.”

The JCC ARC program helps individuals living with Alzheimer’s disease and other forms of dementia, while providing respite, support and guidance for their family caregivers. Programming includes a wide range of upbeat activities that encourage socialization and active participation. The day begins with a nutritious breakfast followed by exercise, music, reminiscing, intergenerational programs, music, holiday celebrations and more that take place in a bright, spacious room with an adjoining patio and garden that overlook a cheerful children’s playground. Door to door transportation in handicapped accessible vehicles is available and the program is overseen by a highly-trained, compassionate staff. For more information, contact Judi Nahary at 201.408.1450 or jnahary@jccotp.org



Alan working on a project in his ceramic class.