

Staying Gold: How a
Group of University
Students Created
Intergenerational
Connections Through
Art Museum
Programming and
Community
Collaboration

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we examine ways in which an intergenerational art program, Stay Gold, helped build relationships between queer youth and elders in an art museum to combat loneliness, isolation, and disconnection. This museum program was initially designed by university students in a graduate art education course to help form connections between queer youth and elders through art-making, sharing stories, and conversations about art. Participants play a large role in shaping the direction of the program, and the program continues to grow and evolve to include more opportunities for collaboration between youth and elders through group projects and dialogue. Although this is not a formal study with IRB approval, the participants mentioned here are all over the age of 18 and gave written permission to use their words and art in the article.

KEYWORDS

intergenerational learning, art museum education, LGBTQIA+ community

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Nothing Gold Can Stay

By Robert Frost

Nature's first green is gold,
 Her hardest hue to hold.
 Her early leaf's a flower;
 But only so an hour.
 Then leaf subsides to leaf.
 So Eden sank to grief,
 So dawn goes down to day.
 Nothing gold can stay.

In this article, we examine ways in which the intergenerational art program, *Stay Gold*, helped build relationships between queer youth and elders in an art museum to combat loneliness, isolation, and disconnection within our community. This museum program was initially designed by University of Arizona students in a graduate art education course to help foster connections between queer youth and elders.¹

University students chose *Stay Gold* as the title for this program as a way to invite LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, and Asexual/Agender) youth and elders to consider how they do, or don't, connect with their community. LGBTQIA+ people commonly experience a disconnection from the world, affecting not only how they view it, but also impacting how they view their place within it. The meaning behind the name *Stay Gold* was meant as both an encouragement and a way to encompass intergenerational participation. *Nothing Gold Can Stay* by Robert Frost... "focuses on the inevitability of loss - how nature, time and mythology are all subject to cycles" (Spacey, 2017). It was also used in the novel, *The Outsiders*, by S.E Hinton (1967), and subsequently the film of the same name.

University students felt these texts, and the meaning behind them, were highly relatable to both youth and elders in the intergenerational program entitled *Stay Gold*. The poem, *Nothing Gold Can Stay*, focuses on suffering from loss and refers to nature and life as a cycle, while the film *The Outsiders*' meaning is filtered through the lens of youth. The latter serves as a reminder to appreciate one's unique view of and place in the world, and to try to remember to look at things earnestly, openly, and with curiosity. It encourages us to retain our innocence and to try to look for the beauty in life, while also acknowledging the challenges. It is a call for curiosity and vulnerability in how we engage with the world. We wanted this for the participants of *Stay Gold*.

¹ While this is not a formal study with IRB approval, the participants are all over the age of 18 and gave written permission to use their words and artworks in the article.

History of the Project

Stay Gold grew out of a graduate class project in art education at the University, taught by Dr. Carissa DiCindio, an assistant professor, and in which Eli Burke, was a doctoral student. The University of Arizona Museum of Art (UAMA) invited students in Dr. DiCindio's class to consider programming they could create to connect to *Mapping Q*, a community arts education program that invites LGBTQIA+ youth to critically analyze representation of identities within museums (Farrar & Pegno, 2017). *Mapping Q* culminates with an exhibition by the participants in this program at the UAMA, and this new program was scheduled to take place during this exhibition. Eli Burke had previously worked with *Mapping Q* through his role as a museum educator and teaching artist.

In addition to *Mapping Q*, Burke had also worked as a teaching artist with another program at the UAMA called the *Latona Project*. This workshop series, designed by Becky Black and David Romero during their time as graduate students in the art education program, was "developed to examine issues of changing LGBTQIA+ senior identity within art museums" (UAMA, 2016). Burke was moved by the powerful experiences the participants had in making art together based on objects at the UAMA. In class he discussed his experience with his peers and the class decided to create a program that gave both seniors and youth a space to work together to create a broader sense of community through the shared experiences of discussing and creating art collaboratively.

In researching other programs like *Stay Gold*, we found that there weren't many in existence. After our first run of *Stay Gold* we did discover a program at the Portland Art Museum, *Powerful Self*, which began at the same time in 2017. "*Powerful Self* is the culmination of a conversational workshop between newly acquainted intergenerational persons from within Pacific Northwest LGBTQIA2S+ communities." (Portland Art Museum, n.d.) This program also culminated in an exhibition. Other programs we discovered for the intergenerational LGBTQIA+ community were geared specifically toward artists or artist residencies.

We built *Stay Gold* from the ground up by listening to the LGBTQIA+IA+ community as we interacted with participants through other community programs. Collaboration with the community was key in developing this program, involving two museums, the local University, the LGBTQIA+IA+ youth center, and our "senior pride" community as the foundation for cultivating participation.

Intergenerational Learning and the LGBTQIA+IA+ Community

For this program, the graduate students in DiCindio's class were interested in working with intergenerational queer audiences to create a forum for them to connect with each other through museum experiences and art-making. A 2010 study by AARP Research found that people identifying as LGBTQIA+ have a greater risk of being "chronically lonely," and those

who identify as LGBTQIA+ who are in midlife and older are more likely to be lonely than those who do not (Anderson & Thayer, 2018). As a result of lifelong discrimination and marginalization, coupled with many 55+ LGBTQIA+ individuals being rejected by family and friends early on in their lives, or having to keep their identities secret for fear of being rejected, this community has been left behind by many of our cultural and educational institutions. There is an abundance of normalized and normalizing spaces offering arts programming, and yet little opportunities specific and relevant to the lived experiences and identities of the queer community.

This is not exclusive to the 55+ queer community. Queer youth also feel the effects of loneliness. Whether through a fear of coming out or feeling rejected and bullied by family, friends, and peers after coming out, these youth are more likely to keep their feelings and identities hidden, creating more pockets of isolation. This isolation has increased due to the use of social media. While online communities can offer spaces of support, they can also become spaces of trauma where unmediated dialogue occurs. Queer youth are more likely to be bullied or harassed on social media, in chat rooms, and through text messages. They report that they do not feel safe online, at school, and traveling to and from school. These experiences lead to lower grades, depression, and low self-esteem (GLSEN, 2013).

With these factors in mind, University students felt it was important to consider the ways in which an arts program could bring these two communities out of their private spaces and into a shared physical space. An intergenerational arts program offered a way to combat the effects of loneliness, isolation, and create a safe space where participants could communicate and create new memories face-to-face.

Cortellesi, Harpley, and Kernan (2018) observe that intergenerational learning is often seen as learning transmitted in one direction, from older to younger generations, but that it can also be multidirectional. Because youth and elder generations are often separated from each other through social institutions, they can have misconceptions about each other, linking childhood with impulsiveness and elders as stuck in their ways. Citing Wentzell (2013), the authors argue that activities that bring these groups together “can question both of these assumptions, providing young children and older people the opportunity to express and experience different selves, to be active learners at any age and to build connections instead of disjunctions” (p. 425).

With the 55+ LGBTQIA+ participants having a lifetime of experience, much of which paved the way for today’s LGBTQIA+ youth, and youth participants coming to the program with fresh perspectives free from the weight of history, we believed that these two groups would have a lot to share with one another, in effect bridging the gap between them through shared knowledge, experiences, and creativity. The role of sharing experiences holds a critical place in the *Stay Gold* program through reciprocity and collaboration (Lawton & LaPorte, 2013).

From the start of *Stay Gold*, we considered ways that we could incorporate opportunities to share narratives and find connections with each other through art-making, conversations, and gallery activities (Lawton, 2004, 2010). Like Kerka (2002), we observed that these connections “foster the development of communication and reflection skills and formation of new perspectives about oneself and others” (p. 2). This reciprocal relationship was at the core of our initial conversations about *Stay Gold*, and one that was reinforced by Chelsea Farrar, curator of community engagement at the UAMA and organizer of *Mapping Q*, and youth of *Mapping Q* as we worked with them in planning for the program.

Intergenerational programs and programs for older adults can be transformative (Lawton & LaPorte, 2013). Creating opportunities for youth and elders to share stories and learn about and from each other are at the heart of *Stay Gold*. From the beginning of the program, we worked closely with participants to empower them to be co-creators in these projects. They helped to make decisions on the format, projects, and direction of the program.

Falk and Dierking (2013) stress that social interactions play an important role in shaping visitors’ experiences in museums, and that these social components are often what are remembered from museum visits. Through these social interactions, museums have become sites for mental health support and well-being. Museums “can provide opportunities for self-development, spiritual and artistic growth, and social connection...The museum offers potential therapeutic opportunities such as a safe space, acceptance of uniqueness and celebration of differences, imparting of information, and installation of hope” (Bennington, Backos, Harrison, Etherington Reader, & Carolan, 2016, p. 34). For *Stay Gold*, the works of art provide ways in which experiences can be shared, and the art in the museum provides inspiration and discussion that continues while making art together in studio spaces. The projects were designed to be open-ended, allowing participants to work together to problem solve, share ideas and suggestions, and experiment together.

Evolution of *Stay Gold*

The invitation to participate in *Stay Gold* is open to queer youth, elders, and allies ages 13-99. We used listservs, fliers, word-of-mouth and social media to promote the program. Youth are not required to have parental permission to participate due to the fact that many youths are not out to their families and requiring this could pose a risk to stable housing and their emotional and physical safety.

Stay Gold started as a four-week program and has expanded to ten weekly sessions due to increased participant interest. We ask participants to register at the beginning of each program, keeping that registration open throughout the duration of the program. Some participate in all of the individual sessions while others drop in and out of the program, attending when they are able. We wanted to remove as many barriers as possible for participants. In allowing for flexibility in attendance, elements such as transportation,

changing work schedules, and other unforeseen events did not inhibit participation. Participants often bring friends with them, and these connections have helped the program to grow. In the first four-week pilot program we had a consistent number of 17 participants, nine youth and eight elders, attending most sessions. In this last program, 26 people participated and included 17 youth and nine elders. The program was initially designed with little funding, using existing supplies in the School of Art at the University of Arizona and the UAMA, but it is now supported through the Museum of Contemporary Art Tucson where it takes place.

The first program of *Stay Gold* was developed by the art education class and focused on storytelling through bookmaking and zines. The students in the class and the youth who were part of *Mapping Q* thought it was important for participants to learn about each other's histories and experiences through narrative projects. This original program took place at the UAMA and in the art education classroom at the School of Art. Students worked with Chelsea Farrar to select works of art from the museum's collection that focused on storytelling and personal experiences. University students in the art education class worked with participants to create different formats of zines and books.



Figure 1. Book made in the first iteration of *Stay Gold* (Artwork by J.P., 2017)

The activities for *Stay Gold* are largely choice-based. We provide general outlines for projects linked to exhibitions; however, participants have the ultimate say in what they want to create each time. For the second iteration participants chose to create a time capsule at the UAMA. Everything they made during the program went into the time capsule. In this iteration participants created self-care playlists, self-portrait drawings using 50 objects that define them, a newspaper front page where participants could highlight topics they found

relevant to them that day, love notes to themselves, a collaborative project that mapped the intersections in their lives, and videos where they talked about how they were and what they were currently doing with their lives. Everything went into the time capsule and participants chose the future date at which time the group would meet again and open it. The time capsule is now stored in the Arizona Queer Archives on the University of Arizona campus until we meet again to revisit what we created.



Figure 2. Artwork made by participant in the second iteration of *Stay Gold*.
(Artwork by J.W., 2018).

After the first year of *Stay Gold* ended, the program moved to the Museum of Contemporary Art Tucson where Eli Burke is Education Director. For the third season, the program was linked to the exhibition "Blessed Be: Mysticism, Spirituality and Occult in Contemporary Art." Participants focused on what sacred space means to them (or doesn't) as members of the queer community as a whole and also how it intersected (or didn't) with the lives of participants. We created pocket shrines, made soul paintings, worked with clay to make vessels, created oracle cards, designed sigils, attended lectures, and collaborated with another community organization on the memorial project *Made for Flight* for Transgender Day of Remembrance.

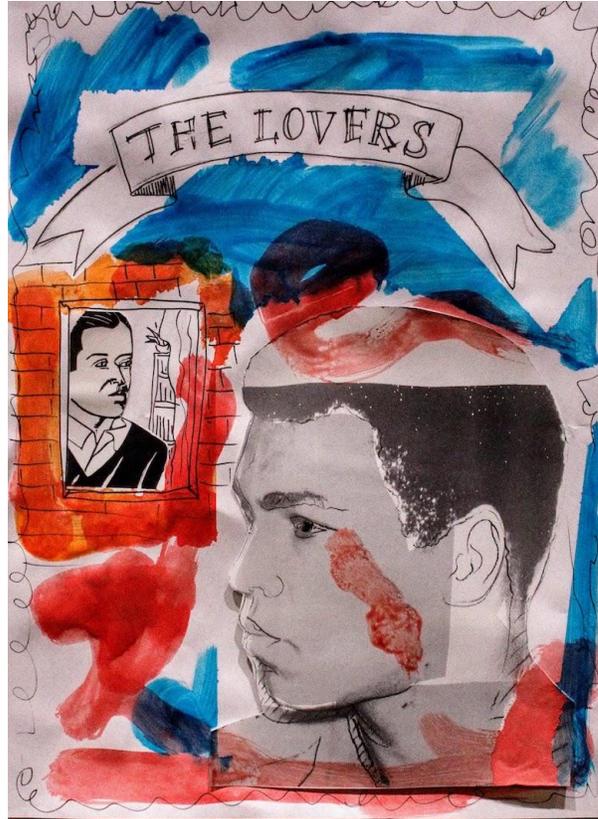


Figure 3: Oracle Card made by participant in the third iteration of *Stay Gold*.

The fourth season of *Stay Gold* was linked to the Museum of Contemporary Art Tucson's exhibition, "Dazzled: OMD, Memphis Design, and Beyond." This exhibition highlighted dazzle camouflage used in WWI. Ships were painted with disorienting designs to confuse the enemy. This was a perfect platform for participants in *Stay Gold* to talk about the ways in which participants have either had to camouflage themselves or have been camouflaged by others. As the program continues, the facilitators of *Stay Gold* are focused on finding new ways to build communication between older and younger participants through group projects that focus on youth and elders working together. Participants created mixed media paintings that camouflaged safe spaces, mapped safe spaces, attended a performance workshop, learned how to work with virtual reality programs, painted camouflage-inspired self-portraits, and collaborated on drawing and gallery activities.

In addition to the exhibition linked to *Mapping Q*, *Stay Gold* participants were invited to exhibit their work at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tucson where the *Stay Gold* currently runs. We wanted to create and opportunity, through *Stay Gold*, to celebrate the work of LGBTQIA+ individuals in our community and give the public opportunities to experience the artwork of *Stay Gold* participants.

Although we focused this article on the program itself, in the future we plan to do an extensive research project that incorporates the participants' voices and perspectives. Graduate students in art education at the university continue to be involved in the program through class projects, museum internships, volunteering, and as participants. Although participants interact with the exhibitions through dialogue, artmaking, and gallery activities, the interactions the participants have together through these explorations of materials, themes in the exhibition, and conversation, are the focus of the program.

Facilitator Experiences: How has the program impacted us as both facilitators and participants?

Eli Burke: My experience with this program has been profound and deeply moving. Approaching this *Stay Gold* from the perspective of a learner/student rather than my usual role as museum educator allowed me to access this program on a more personal level and also gave me time to consider my experience within the program as we were moving through it. For the first time in my life I had found myself in a classroom filled with people of all ages who were part of my community. What would learning look like when I did not have to navigate the entanglements of identity? I had always felt like an outsider within educational spaces. This was new for me.

The intergenerational aspect was also key, for I had been in many spaces serving queer youth, however I never had access to a space within which I could interact with the 55+ queer community. This was very validating and created a feeling of safety within an educational setting that I had never experienced before. The opportunity to connect with the 55+ members of my own community and gain a deeper understanding of their lives and personal challenges and triumphs validated my own experience and also gave me hope that things are evolving in a positive direction, despite any temporary setbacks or bumps in the road. In a way, it allowed me to zoom out and see the big picture, not just struggle within my own little bubble of time and experience. Not only did this program teach me the value it held for participants, but it also highlighted on a deeply personal level, the ways in which I still had room to heal from my past experiences as a member of the queer community and a hopefulness that this was even possible.

Carissa DiCindio: *Stay Gold*, in particular, has shown me how critically important it is to create art museum programs with individuals who have been marginalized in these spaces in the past. As an ally, I am thankful to be a part of this program. I am grateful for the opportunity to form my own bonds with participants through the art we create together and learn from the informal conversations we have in the museum. Art education students, staff at the museum, and participants in the program usually take the lead in designing the sessions, and I am happy to help support the program behind the scenes and by working with art education students who continue to be involved beyond class assignments with this program.

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