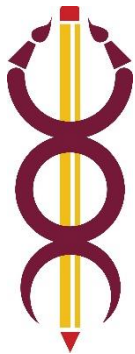


North Dakota Council on the Arts 2026 *Art for Life* Program Gathering



Creative Aging, Arts, and Health



Art is medicine. Studies indicate that art positively impacts the immune system, blood pressure, heart rate, and respiration. Music stimulates the production of natural endorphins and can be used in pain management. Dance improves gait speed and balance, while reducing frailty and fall risk. Cultural programs improve cognitive functions of older people with dementia. Arts programs reduce risk factors that lead to the need for long-term care. Arts serve as vehicles for creative engagement that also reduces loneliness and its negative health impacts. Like physical therapy, ongoing consistent participation in such programming is essential for positive impact.

Animal-Assisted Intergenerational Creative Engagement for Health, Wellness, and Education

This year's gathering will focus on the North Dakota Council on the Arts (NDCA) *Art for Life* and *Arts Education's* expanded partnership in animal-assisted creative engagement for health, wellness, and education. Animal-assisted interventions positively impact health and wellness – blood pressure, heart rate, depression, anxiety, social interaction, mood, and more. Imagine the impact when combined with that of art and intergenerational interaction.

Where: Jamestown Fine Arts Association, 115 2nd Street SW, Jamestown, ND
When: Thursday, March 12, 12 PM – 4:30 PM

12:00 PM – 12:20 PM: *Welcome and Introductions*

12:20 PM – 12:50 PM: *Art for Life: Folk Arts, Aging, Health, Wellness, and Animal Assisted Intergenerational Creative Engagement for Health, Wellness, and Education*, Troyd Geist, NDCA – Folklorist Troyd Geist will introduce the North Dakota Council on the Arts' *Art for Life Program* which seeks to improve the health and wellness of elders, often including intergenerational interaction, through intensive art and artist interactions. He also will discuss the program's expanded ongoing partnerships with zoos and other animal-focused organizations – Chahinkapa, Dakota, and Roosevelt Zoos and Nome Schoolhouse/Eweniversity – including the positive health and wellness impacts associated with “animal-assisted interventions.”

Michele L. Morrison writes, “The use of animals in the promotion or improvement of health is long-standing, yet this complementary healing modality is not widely integrated into mainstream health care. ... AAls result in statistically significant health benefits with improvements in blood pressure, heart rate, and salivary immunoglobulin A levels and in depression, anxiety, perceived quality of health, and loneliness” (*Health Benefits of Animals-Assisted Interventions*, Complementary Health Practice Review, 2007; 12: 51)

12:50 PM – 1:20 PM: *Impact of Intergenerational and Animal Interaction on Education*, Matthew Anderson, NDCA – Arts Education Director Matthew Anderson will present on the positive educational impacts for older people and children sparked by intergenerational and animal interaction using an *Art for Life* example from Wahpeton, ND. When elementary students visited an eldercare setting and learned from Chahinkapa Zoo animals and their presenters while creating art together guided by a professional artist. Matthew will highlight how animal interaction can instantly raise curiosity, comfort, and attention. What happens educationally when elders and children make art side-by-side? Conversation starts faster, confidence grows, and learners take on natural “teacher/learner” roles that deepen understanding and intergenerational connection.

1:20 PM – 1:30 PM: *Break*

1:30 PM – 2:30 PM: *Zoo Animal Outreach and Education, Animal-Assisted Art Activities*, Kathy Diekman and Tom Schmaltz, Chahinkapa Zoo – Long-time *Art for Life Program* partners Kathy and Tom will describe the impact they've witnessed when bringing together elders, children, animals, and artistic engagement. They will present and talk about animals they use in their educational

outreach followed by an artistic engagement related to animals – the *Tiny Print Press Endangered Species Field Guide*.

Interacting with animals has been shown to reduce blood pressure and cholesterol, decrease anxiety, and improve a person's sense of well-being, reduce the perception of loneliness, and reduce the need for pain medication. “Animal-assisted activity programs are commonly used in long-term care facilities to enhance the well-being of older residents. ... [Such programs serve] as a source of social support for some participants and encouraged social interaction. Participants generally ... expressed a desire for more frequent, longer, and more interactive visits. Facilities considering animal-assisted activities (AAA) programs should consider these factors when designing their programs.”

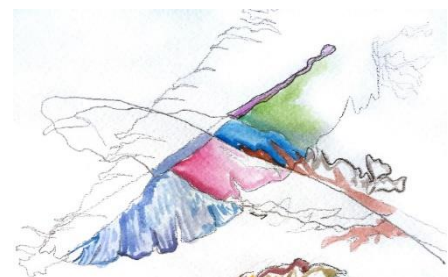
2:30 PM – 3:15 PM: *Dance and the Natural World*, Rosari Sarasvaty, Northern Plains Dance – Rosari will be coordinating with zoos, especially Dakota Zoo in Bismarck, for outreach presentations to eldercare/service organizations and school pairs in rural areas. She will lead a group exploration of movement inspired by plant, bird, and/or mammal imagery. Participants will engage in guided improvisation and collaborative movement-making.

This experience supports physical wellness through gentle, adaptable movement that encourages mobility, balance, coordination, and body awareness. Emotional wellness is nurtured through creative expression and storytelling, offering participants opportunities for reflection, stress reduction, and confidence-building. Social wellness is strengthened by fostering meaningful interaction, empathy, and a sense of belonging across generations through collaborative movement-making inspired by the Natural World.

3:15 PM – 3:30 PM: *Break*

3:30 PM – 4:30 PM: *Cyanotype and the Natural World: Bridging Generations, Wellness and Education (Session One)*, Sherry Niesar, North Dakota Game & Fish Department – One of our newest organizational partners, Sherry, is available to conduct intergenerational creative engagement art activities related to animals and plants. In her session, participants will make a cyanotype print using plant, bird, and/or mammal artifacts. In so doing, connection, conversation, and artistic and educational inquiry will be promoted. Impact is deepened through association with live animals and artifact engagement.

Supper on own (*Buffalo Grill, Jonny B's Brickhouse, Babb's Coffee House, The Depot, La Carreta Mexican Restaurant, Paradiso Mexican Restaurant, Izumi*)



Where: Jamestown Fine Arts Association, 115 2nd Street SW, Jamestown, ND
When: Friday, March 13, 9 AM – 4:30 PM

9:00 AM – 9:30 AM: *Art for Life Program Q&A, Sharing Successful Stories* – Program partners have an opportunity to ask questions, make suggestions, and share success stories.

- Donna Orn, Activities Mission Coordinator, SMP Maryhill, Enderlin, ND – Final reports reflecting wellness measurements
- Deb Foss, Life Enrichment Director, Benedictine Living Community, Garrison, ND – Animal-themed week
- Amy Jo & David Paukert – Integrating the Sundogs and Sunflowers folklore book into Art for Life Program activities
- Others

9:30 AM – 10:15 AM: *Light as a Feather: Blind Contour Line Drawing and Painting (Session One)*, Rebecca Engelman, The Engelman Group – This session utilizes feathers to create a continuous blind contour line drawing as a challenging yet fun exercise in ornithological observation and hand-eye coordination that may be new to many participants. As such, the activity provides new mental and visual stimulation that will help to address boredom. The idea of this activity is to examine the structure of feathers and to throw artistic “perfection” out the window and instead embrace whatever happens.

Step by step instructions for this engagement can be found on the NDCA’s website under the *Art for Life* tab as part of the program’s collection of activity plans, “Sundogs and Sunflowers Toolkit.”
<https://www.arts.nd.gov/art-life-program/sundogs-and-sunflowers-toolkit>

10:15 AM – 11:15 AM: *Needle Felting*, Chris Armbrust, Nome Schoolhouse/Eweniversity – Nome Schoolhouse in Nome, North Dakota, is a new partner in the Art for Life Program’s animal-assisted intergenerational creative engagement work with rural community eldercare/service and school/school-age children outreach. Chris will describe her organization’s focus on traditional fiber arts, their fiber mill, and presentation of animals used for fiber. She will lead participants in a needle felting project highlighting animal tracks.

11:15 AM – 11:45 AM: *TellTale: Creative Engagement and Wellbeing Through Visual Thinking Strategies and TimeSlips*, Brenna Lahren and Troyd Geist, NDCA – This small exhibit features a Swedish *bonadsmålning* painting by Peiper Bloomquist of Grand Forks, ND. The painting depicts reminiscences and stories told by elders. The painting is augmented by two didactic panels, a touchscreen monitor with audio of the stories, as well as six Visual Thinking Strategy (VTS) and

six TimeSlips activity plans. Designed specifically for the *Art for Life Program*, it is now available for booking and is free of charge. Brenna will be in touch with you to book possible dates for touring to each of your organizations and communities. It also can be displayed in your local schools and libraries.

VTS is an inquiry-based teaching method that improves a participant's ability to describe, analyze, and interpret imagery and information through observing and discussing visual art. VTS supports the development of critical thinking skills and encourages participation in collaborative discussions. It often is used in educational settings and increasingly in medical institutions. TimeSlips is a complementary storytelling engagement employing interesting images to collaboratively create a narrative based on imagination rather than memory recall. Both are used in education and both nurture engagement, memory, and cognitive health.

11:45 AM – 1:00 PM: *LUNCH PROVIDED: Jamestown Fine Arts (Tie with animals or aromatics.)*

- *Folklorico: Traditional Dance, Animals, and Health*, Marina Carrillo Prieto and Néstor Juárez García, Colibrí Heritage Community Center (30 minutes) – During lunch, Marina and Néstor, will introduce us to their nonprofit Colibrí, meaning “Hummingbird” in Spanish. They will introduce us to the prevalence of animal stories and imagery in traditional Mexican dance whereby animal symbolism in creative movement speaks to respect for and harmony with Nature. They will perform *Danza El Alcatrán*, a traditional barefoot dance that mimics a bird's movements.

“In older adults, regular exercise can prevent or delay diabetes and heart trouble. It can also reduce arthritis pain, anxiety, and depression. Regular exercise leads to improved physical function and reduced disability in older adults. It also has been shown to enhance psychosocial function and to help older people stay independent.” Dance also can educate others regarding the movements, behaviors, and character of animals.

1:00 PM – 1:45 PM: *Light as a Feather: Blind Contour Line Drawing and Painting (Session Two)*, Rebecca Engelman, The Engelman Group – Often artistic engagements can be “one-offs,” or they can be built upon to help provide ongoing, consistent interaction for deeper impact. In this session, Rebecca does just that by guiding us to enhance the work done in Session One.

Other impacts of blind contour line drawing: If someone has a shaky hand or other mobility issue, the extra bumps and waves in the lines really are just a part of the texture and should thus be embraced. The sense of control over the finalized mark-making, as well as the unique choices the participants will be encouraged to make helps to address the sense of helplessness. Studies

also indicate that such exercises can be beneficial for post-stroke rehabilitation for those who lost the use of their dominant hand and ability to speak by strengthening the capacity of their non-dominant hand to write.

1:45 PM – 3:00 PM: *From the Wellspring: Nature-Based Symbolism of Ukrainian and Polish Easter Eggs, Mary Waagen* – The Ukrainian and Polish Easter egg has roots in pre-Christian traditions at least 5,000 years old. A perfect example of syncretism, the blending of old with new, nature-based religious beliefs and symbolism blended with Christian beliefs. The result, an extremely elaborate traditional art where every color and symbol has a meaning. The combination thereof arranged according to the “message” the maker wants to convey. Stags, roosters, doves, flowers, vines, stars, and more are represented. Mary will discuss the tradition and help us make our own Easter egg whose colors and symbols represent a “wish for good health.”

3:00 PM – 3:15 PM: *Break*

3:15 PM – 4:15 PM: *Cyanotype and the Natural World: Bridging Generations, Wellness and Education (Session Two), Sherry Niesar, North Dakota Game & Fish Department* – Sherry directs the group in artistic enhancement of the artwork started in Session One. Searching for feathers, leaves, flowers, and animal artifacts outside fosters engagement with Nature. Nature enhances well-being by reducing stress hormones, improving focus, boosting physical health through increased activity and better air quality, and promoting social connections. Spending time in natural environments lowers blood pressure and heart rate, stimulates the immune system, and provides opportunities for exercise, relaxation, and community building. Short exposure to nature can have positive effects on people, even a 10-minute walk in a park or green space can provide significant mental health benefits. Nature can be made accessible by ensuring green spaces are available and well-maintained within communities to maximize their benefits for everyone.

4:15 PM – 4:30 PM: *Wrap-up and Goodbyes (Drive Safe)*

***“All nature is doing her best each moment to make us well—
she exists for no other end. Do not resist her.”***

(Henry David Thoreau, journal entry, 1853)

