

A Thousand Words: Photography of Favorite Places



Activity, Time and Materials

ACTIVITY:

The individual activity plans within this compilation stand on their own. However, they are stronger when, with ingenuity and thought, they are linked to one another. The value in this is that it extends and deepens the interaction. For impact to be felt, the activities must be ongoing and consistent. Tying various plans to one another also adds value and impact to the work as a whole. From a pragmatic point of view, more is done in less time because one is not always starting from scratch. Thus, the plan designed herein serves as an example of potential interconnections between plans. In this plan, the groundwork begins with discussions of favorite places, then moves to visits to and photographs taken of those places. What follows is a logical, progressive link to other activity plans, building upon a common foundation. Care facility activities directors, photographers, or volunteers can all direct the activities. However, they should have some knowledge of digital cameras and computer photography programs. (The photography component of this plan was inspired by the artistic work of Ken Schmierer, the local *Art for Life Program* coordinator in Ellendale, ND.)

TIME:

Four hours and fifteen minutes over four sessions (not counting preparation work or the time spent on other activity plans).

MATERIALS:

- Coffee and snacks
- Bottles of water
- Digital camera
- Tripod
- Wireless remote sensor for camera (to take photographs)
- Computer with photography program (to edit photographs)
- Vehicle to transport small group of elders (care facilities often have adaptive vans to transport residents)
- The book *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains* (for use in the additional activity plans identified herein)

“THREE PLAGUES” (LONELINESS, BOREDOM, HELPLESSNESS):

Conversations with the person directing the plan and among residents of the care facility address both loneliness and boredom. Providing an opportunity to leave the care facility, even for a short trip, can be uplifting—especially if the place to be visited occupies a special place in the hearts of the residents. Photography, with direction, guidance, and a few adaptations, can be a forgiving artistic medium for people with varying physical and emotional capacities. A good digital camera (with images enhanced through the use of a computer), an adjustable tripod, and a wireless sensor, which allows for photographs to be taken remotely, eliminates the effects of unsteady hands. This addresses the sense of helplessness, while also allowing for beautiful art to be created.

ASSOCIATED MEDICAL STUDY:

“A significant concern associated with growing old is the loss of cognitive function, resulting in dementia. Fortunately, the current research on aging indicates that cognitive decline is not an inevitable function of the aging process. Moreover, individuals can take steps to maintain cognitive health throughout life. This paper reviews the research findings and recommendations for maintaining cognitive health that were presented at a meeting sponsored by the Alliance for Health and the Future in November 2003. The meeting, ‘Placing Cognitive Health on Europe’s Social and Economic Agenda,’ reviewed the current state of knowledge about cognitive health and discussed its implications for an aging Europe. Although the brain, for reasons that remain unclear, changes with age, a growing body of research suggests that social engagement, intellectual stimulation, and physical activity play a key role in maintaining cognitive health and preventing cognitive decline. As the number of older people increases and people live longer, developing and implementing strategies for maintaining cognitive health should be a priority for both individuals and societies.” [Abstract]

--Butler, R.N., F. Forette, and B.S. Greengross. “Maintaining Cognitive Health in an Aging Society.” The Journal of the Royal Society for the Promotion of Health 124, no. 3 (May 2004): 119-121.

Activity Plan

SESSION 1 (45 MINUTES):

I. The person directing this plan, such as a photographer or activities director, should obtain permission to take one group of care facility residents at a time off-site. The purpose of this trip is to take photographs of places nearby that hold special significance for the residents. Make arrangements to have appropriate staff accompany and transport the group in the facility's handicapped-accessible van.

With prior approval and arrangements made, the person directing the plan should meet with a small group of care facility participants, perhaps four individuals at a time. Work with as many groups as desired, but keep them small. Have coffee and snacks available. Introduce yourself, if you are new to the residents. Engage them all in conversation, inquiring about the lives of the residents. Pay attention to the special experiences shared and where those experiences occurred, especially noting places that are within a short driving distance from the care facility. Ask what places are special to them and how do those places make them feel. For people with memory difficulties, focus on imagining a special place and then ask for them to describe it. What places nearby hold special memories, experiences, or opportunities for imagining?

Tell the participants that you would like to take them to visit those places. Elaborate by saying that you will help them to take photographs of those places to keep in their rooms. Explain that

approval has been granted and that the facility's van will be available. Reassure the residents that they CAN take beautiful pictures, and that you have the equipment with which to help them do so. Set a date and time for the next session, during which they will be shown the equipment to be used.

SESSION 2 (45 MINUTES):

I. The person directing the plan should remind the group that they soon will visit a place close by of each of their choosing. Again, keep the group small so that intimacy of conversation can occur and the activity is leisurely. Have coffee and snacks available.

Introduce the elders to the equipment. Explain that the camera is digital and that many photographs can be taken and enhanced via computer photography programs. Demonstrate how a remote sensor can be used to take pictures from a distance without having to physically touch the camera. Shaky hands are in this way not an issue. Demonstrate how a tripod is used, and can be adjusted by angle and height.

2. Ask each participant where they want to go, such as a place with a special memory or a place that makes them feel good. Obtain directions, and plan on visiting no more than three or four of these places. Set a time and date for the "field trip."

SESSION 3 (2 HOURS):

(Time can vary depending on needs of the residents and the distance to be traveled.)

1. Assemble everyone in the van. Make sure residents have their medications, canes, walkers, or whatever else they may need. Provide bottled water and snacks throughout the trip. Drive to each of the three or four special places. On the way to each place, talk to the person to whom it is special and, again, ask why the place is special. How does it make you feel? Does it bring back memories? What memories do you recall when you think of it?

2. At each location, ask the person for whom it is special what makes the place so meaningful. Inquire as to what he or she sees that has significance, or what he or she sees that is beautiful. If, for instance, the old homestead is visited, the elder might reminisce about sitting on the front stoop as a boy, eating popsicles as the frozen treat melts and drips onto his hands, making the doorknob sticky when he goes inside the house. Perhaps the person recalls painting the house. If so, a detail image of the walls of the house could be taken as one of the series of three images to be featured. Focus the photography on memories, experiences, feelings, or imaginings associated with each location.

For example, ask the elder if he would like to take a picture of the old homestead. Set up and adjust the tripod. Mount the camera. Frame the image. Have the elder take the photograph with the remote sensor. Tell the elder that since he mentioned sitting on the front stoop, why not take a close-up, detail photograph of it? Discuss interesting angles or any interesting marks on the stoop that might make for a beautiful picture. Then do the same with the doorknob. Point out that close-up, detail images can create an interesting artistic look that tells a story when later grouped with other related pictures. Then take a picture of the elder sitting or standing on the stoop.



Images based on the content of a meaningful place and an associated reminiscence of eating popsicles on the front stoop and getting the doorknob sticky with the melted treat. (Images by Ken Schmierer; Ellendale Area Arts Council.)



Images based on the content of a meaningful place and an associated reminiscence of painting the house. (Images by Ken Schmierer; Ellendale Area Arts Council.)

At each site, determine the content of the photographs based on what is elicited from the elder. This could be a spontaneous process, as well. Perhaps during the ride, one elder remarks about the beauty of a field of wheat that they pass. Did the person have a connection to farming? Take advantage of the opportunity and engage that person in taking photographs of the field. Again, however, frame the first image as a broad shot, showing the panoramic landscape of the field. As before, encourage other interesting, close-up photographs to be shot, in this way adding interest and contrast to the overall panoramic image. Perhaps take a close-up of a single head of wheat. Another shot could be a close-up of the stems. Have the elder snap the picture with the remote sensor. Engage him or her in conversation, asking for input as to what detail shots might add interest to the broadly framed image. Keep always in mind what images might help to tell a story. Take a picture of the elder by or in the field.

3. Return to the care facility and set a date and time for the next session.



Images based on a spontaneous observation and comment upon the beauty of a wheatfield. (Images by Troyd Geist, North Dakota Council on the Arts.)

SESSION 4 (45 MINUTES):

1. Prior to this session, download the digital images from the camera to a computer. Visit with the residents over coffee and snacks, asking them what they enjoyed most about the field trip. Inquire if they would like to see their photographs. Ask each person which images, from his or her own respective photoshoot, he or she likes best. On the computer, show them how the images enhance and support one another's beauty when arranged in groups of three: the broadly framed image in the middle, flanked by two close-up, detail shots.
2. Demonstrate how the images can be cropped or otherwise enhanced or changed with certain computer programs. Ask for their opinion, help, and input on whether or not certain images should be adjusted. Show them what you mean and let them know the image can be changed back to how it was previously. With each individual, select the three best pictures to be used side by side. Together, evaluate the images to see if any could be enhanced or corrected. If so, correct them accordingly with the help of the resident.
3. Provide the participants with their series of three photographs (one broadly framed, flanked by two related close-up shots) selected from their respective photoshoots. These photographs can now be displayed in the elders' rooms.

Note: Some of the residents of the care facility may be from the area. If so, they could visit places special to them such as old farmsteads or lakes where their families picnicked. Other residents may not be from the area and may not be able to travel as far to

see the actual places special to them. In these instances, make do by visiting alternative locations that resemble their special places or bring back special memories like old schoolhouses or parks.

PROGRESSIVE LINK TO OTHER ACTIVITY PLANS, BUILDING UPON A COMMON FOUNDATION:

1. With so many beautiful photographs created, these same images can be used further by following the activity plan "Memoirs from Photographs: Creative Writing." In that plan, participants look at selected photographs and write of memories related to the content or subjects depicted in the photos.
2. These interesting photographs and writings could be further developed by following the activity plan "Springtime Wanderings: Exhibiting Creative Projects." This plan presents the basics of exhibit design and layout, with the elders involved in the work. After the exhibit, the photographs would go back to their respective owners.
3. If you want to focus on poetry instead of memoirs as a related writing activity, follow the activity plan entitled "'Where I'm From': Poetry." This plan features a poem written by George Ella Lyon. She encourages people to create their own poems using hers as a guidepost. It involves collecting very specific personal information and then creating a poem that tells where a person is from and what is most important to that particular person. Such a personalized poem displayed next to that person's exhibited photographs would add both context and deeper meaning.

4. Finally, with interesting photographs beautifully displayed, the activity plan entitled “TimeSlips: The Encouragement to Imagine” could be utilized. TimeSlips is a creative storytelling technique developed by Anne Davis Basting and the Center on Age and Community at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee. This technique, which is especially useful for people with memory issues, uses images to tell stories, replacing “the pressure to remember with the encouragement to imagine.”

AUTHOR • KEN SCHMIERER:

Artist and arts advocate, Ken is from Ellendale, ND. After graduating from Northern State University in Aberdeen, SD, Ken moved to Kansas and worked as the manager of the Help Desk, Information Center, and Customer Service for Payless Shoe Source for twenty-five years. He then spent five years in El Paso, Texas, as a vice president for Stored Value Systems, the company that originated the gift card industry. He returned to Ellendale in 2004 and now lives on Main Street near where he grew up. Current and former residents of Ellendale are familiar with Ken’s striking photographs of the area’s scenery and buildings. From his perspective as a former resident who has returned, the city’s buildings and surrounding farmland are captured as reflecting true small-town America. Using computer manipulation, Ken adds colors to the views, creating haunting, memorable snapshots of sunsets, wind towers, abandoned farmsteads, Main Street, and other scenes. He currently is a board member of the North Dakota Humanities Council, the Ellendale Opera House, and the Prince of Peace Care Center. He is a contributing writer for *Dakota Fire Magazine*, serves as the Creative Director of the Historic

Ellendale Opera House, and manages the *Art for Life Program* in Ellendale.

AUTHOR • TROYD GEIST:

Troyd is the state folklorist with the North Dakota Council on the Arts who is charged with encouraging the preservation and continuation of folk and traditional arts, heritage, and culture. He holds a Master of Arts degree in Sociology/Anthropology from North Dakota State University, and has participated in and conducted projects involving the impact of folk art and folk traditions on personal health and well-being. Those efforts include traditional storytellers working with fetal alcohol research and prevention programs, Bell’s palsy as viewed and treated in traditional cultures, familial Alzheimer’s disease tracking using anthropological methods, and the use of culturally infused narrative and traditional music for guided imagery. He directed the original *Art for Life* pilot project in 2001-2003, which measured the effects of long-term folk arts and artist interaction on combating the negative impact of the “Three Plagues” (loneliness, boredom, and helplessness) that many residents in elder care facilities experience. Subsequently, he developed the *Art for Life Program*. With Dr. Timothy J. Kloberdanz, Troyd co-edited, co-compiled, and co-authored the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains*.