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Free library workshops: For older adults it's never too late to learn

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Peter Andrew Bosch / Miami Herald staff

Edna Pinks, (center front) is part of a group learning hand quilting at the South Miami Library, Saturday, January 19h, 2013. This is part of a new push by the public library, funded by various grants, to get older adults socially active and connected, while learning new skills.

Threaded needle in mid-stitch, Delorise Thompkins surveyed the colorful blocks that, in a few weeks, will become her first completed quilt. She looked pleased: So far, so good

“This is something I can pass on to my grandchildren and they can pass on to their children,” said Thompkins, 69. “It’s something you create to connect.”

Thompkins was one of more than a dozen students in a quilt workshop run by Anita Jones, appropriately titled “Wisdom: Pass it On!” It’s the first in a series of free classes offered for seniors at five Miami-Dade public library branches.

The series, called Lifetime Living through Art for Older Adults, features quilting, drawing, photography, painting and jewelry-making classes. Taught by local professional artists to the 55-and-over set, the workshops are supported by a national grant designed to engage seniors both in their community and in the arts.

Miami-Dade’s library system is one of seven in four states— and the only one in Florida — to receive such a grant from the MetLife Foundation Creative Aging Libraries Project. Funders look

for an aging demographic, a strong library system with a good educational track record and a vibrant arts community. They found all that in Miami — and something else, too.

As library director Raymond Santiago explained, “Our cultural mix was very attractive.”

Indeed. Jones’ class at the South Miami branch was a reflection of multicultural Miami, a hodge-podge of ethnicities and professions united by an interest in learning about a venerable folk

tradition. While a couple of the students had tried quilting before, most in the class were new to the form.

"I've always wanted to learn but never had the time," said Carol Kaminsky, 56. "Now I have the time." Though she still works full-time as a dance teacher, her grown children now don't require so much of her attention.

Along the way, Kaminsky has discovered that the fine art of hand-stitching is both demanding and calming. "I like the feeling of sewing, of my fingers moving with the thread and cloth. It's very relaxing."

Irma Ulate, 68, a retired bank teller, wanted to get out of the house and learn something new. So she and her sister Ada Martins signed up for the 10-week workshop. Now she's not only learning to quilt, but "I'm meeting other people and doing something I've always wanted to do."

Jones, an urbanologist who specializes in southern folk art, incorporates the history and customs that accompany the tradition of quilting into her lessons. She tells her students, most of whom are older than she is, that quilting is more than a collection of fabric blocks sewn together.

"You're sewing your spirit into it," she said. "You can use it to teach the lessons you've learned."

The idea of offering arts workshops as a way of enhancing the lives of older adults began five years ago in the Westchester Public Library as a small initiative by the New York based non-profit Lifetime Arts. "People are living longer and they're looking for new ways to express themselves," said Lifetime Arts CEO Maura O'Malley.

Older adults who register for the arts workshops range in age from 50 to 100, and most have little, if any, experience in the fields. But they're eager to try their hand at something new.

"There's more and more interest in positive aging," O'Malley said. "The attitude is if not now, when?"

Santiago said that's an accurate reflection of those signing up for the Miami-Dade offerings. "I think it's the intellectual stimulation and the idea that it's never too late to do what you've always wanted to do."

Why offer the classes in a library instead of a studio? "The library is a community anchor," O'Malley said. "They host everything from job training to book clubs to knitting circles."

Back at Jones' class, her students kept busy discussing symbols of wisdom as they hand-stitched their blocks together. She urged them not to worry about perfection but about connecting with their work, with others, with themselves.

"If you don't like the stitches," she said, "slow down. That's what this is all about. Slowing down. The purpose is to look back, to see the value in your life."