



OASIS and Intergenerational Collaborations

My name is Marylen Mann, Founder and Chairman of OASIS, a U.S., non-profit organization founded in 1982 and dedicated to enriching the lives of older Americans. OASIS programs are made possible through creative collaborations with more than 600 partners in 27 cities in the United States.

Although the topic of this panel is intergenerational collaborations, I would like to set the stage by telling you about OASIS.

- In 1998, a groundbreaking, ten-year study funded by the MacArthur Foundation, a very large and prestigious private foundation in the U.S., identified three key ingredients for preserving a high quality of life: maintaining a low risk for disease, a high level of engagement with one's community, and high physical and cognitive function. And it is the combination of all three that represents the concept of successful aging.
 - The MacArthur study confirmed what we at OASIS learned to be true years before, when we started the organization.
 - Three decades ago, I toured a number of senior centers in my hometown of St. Louis, Missouri. In each center, I saw basic needs being met but a world of potential going to waste. Some of the seniors were doing nothing more than childlike crafts or card games. Others sat idly around the rooms.
 - It touched my heart to see people in these centers who had raised families and held productive jobs, have such limited opportunities as they aged?" I was sure we could do better for the elderly.
- Fortunately for OASIS and the 365,000 older adults we serve today, in 1982, the U.S. Administration on Aging funded a two-year OASIS pilot in four cities. The grant was one of a number of public/private demonstration grants offered by the federal agency at the time.
- This early support was critical as we went about the task of finding out exactly what members of our aging population wanted and needed. We conducted focus groups. We took surveys. And we talked to older people. This was so important. OASIS is successful because it has, from the beginning, been fueled by the vision, energy and ideas of the older adults themselves.

- As a result, OASIS is organized around three principles that seemed unique a quarter of a century ago, but are now widely accepted: lifelong learning, health promotion/disease prevention and civic engagement or volunteering. OASIS develops curriculum in response to needs and interests in these areas, and every new program, whether it be a history program, an intergenerational volunteer program or a health program, is pilot-tested, evaluated and refined before sharing with the rest of the OASIS network.
- LIFELONG LEARNING is the need to challenge the mind and continue personal growth. Older adults want and need to keep learning! OASIS offers a rich array of courses in the arts and humanities, business, computers, history and discussion groups.
- The classes are taught by other older adults or experts, many who are volunteers, who have been trained to deliver the information in ways that are proven effective for older adults. When OASIS was started, there was little research about the learning styles of older people, but today we know quite a bit. OASIS has contributed to this body of knowledge.
- HEALTHY LIFESTYLE is the second principle around which OASIS programs are based. Older adults want and need to be independent and active! They want to know more about how physical activity, nutrition and managing health risks can help them do this.
- When OASIS was started, healthy living information for seniors was limited to lectures and screenings. OASIS encourages evidence-based health programs that involve individual goal-setting, personal choices and most important peer support for participants.
- Health programs delivered by OASIS are proven to make a difference in the health of older adults.
- One such program, called “Active Living Every Day,” is designed to help people become and stay physically active. Another one, called “A Matter of Balance,” is designed to reduce fear of falling and increase activity levels among older adults who manifest this concern. These are just a few examples of the many dynamic health initiatives offered by OASIS centers across the U.S.
- CIVIC ENGAGEMENT—This is the principle that is dearest to me. Older adults want to feel relevant and need to engage with their communities! They want to devote their time, energy and experiences to meet real needs in the community. We also know from research and experience that older adults gain the greatest enjoyment and satisfaction by volunteering with children in intergenerational opportunities.
 - Our Intergenerational Tutoring Program is a perfect example of what we Americans call a “win-win” collaboration. OASIS members are given specialized training and then volunteer as reading tutors in elementary schools

working with children in the early grades who are not reading or writing at grade level.

- Since the program started in 1989, nearly 5,500 tutors have helped 250,000 children in 902 schools. And 90 percent of the students in the program demonstrated improved academic performance.
- One of those tutors, a woman named Esther Taylor, has been with the program for nine years. To quote Esther, “If you want to have one of the best days of your life, come help a child learn to read.”
- Regular tutor meetings provide on-going training and support. Teachers and principals note that the presence of the OASIS tutors enhances the atmosphere of the school. Many of the tutors become fast friends and continue their relationship during the summer break. Many also stay to volunteer for other roles in the school such as working in the library.
- Another example is the OASIS Active Generations program, an intergenerational approach that engages older adults in meaningful ways to help combat childhood obesity, a growing problem in our nation. Active Generations partners children in grades 3-5 with older adults to learn healthy habits. OASIS volunteers are trained to participate in this after-school program that promotes healthy eating and physical activity. Using a nationally-developed curriculum, the seniors teach the elementary school children the importance of good nutrition and exercise. They play games together, like trying to find a name for a fruit or vegetable for every letter of the alphabet. Each week there’s a group physical activity such as gardening. They always share a healthy snack. It’s one more activity to bring the generations together.
- Intergenerational programs like Active Generations bring together the young and the old in an atmosphere that enlivens everyone. The children learn from the experience of their older adult partners and bring a sense of accomplishment and joy to the seniors as they gain new skills and knowledge about good nutrition and physical activity.
- Sharing experiences and strengthening ties between generations is the foundation of the OASIS Internet Mentoring program. Seniors connect with children in middle school grades through email. This is an exciting and fun volunteer opportunity for seniors to help children learn, especially for seniors who cannot travel to a school or community location each week. The seniors use computers and the Internet to create meaningful reading and writing lessons for the students. And seniors improve their computer and Internet skills, another great benefit of the program!
- Today, young medical students have little opportunity in their training to interact with active, healthy older adults. Because of the aging population, physicians will be treating a greater number of older adults who are struggling with chronic diseases with little experience in understanding that these patients have been and are active, creative members of society.

- An intergenerational program, Vital Visionaries, was developed through a partnership with the National Institute on Aging, a government agency. The mingling of young and old is at the heart of the program by pairing medical students with healthy older people for a hands-on art journey designed to improve future doctors' attitudes towards older people. Everyone has a lot of fun exploring through art and medical students begin to see older people differently. Participants in Vital Visionaries learn about one another and it is a first step towards improving how medical students view older adults.
- The arts are another springboard for bringing the generations together. Recently OASIS collaborated with an opera company and a high school to create an original opera. The seniors and the high school students learned about each others' lives through conversation and written exercises. They wrote poetry about the common themes in their lives, set the poetry to music and staged an opera.
- Volunteerism is an integral component to OASIS programming and it benefits everyone involved. While we find that most older adults want to work with younger generations and especially small children, there are many other opportunities for volunteer work through OASIS, and all offer new challenges to our volunteers.
- In addition to providing program content and volunteer opportunities that are appropriate and appealing for seniors, OASIS embraces the importance of creating communities and spaces in which older adults feel comfortable and vital.
- Again, it is important to understand just how unique the early partnerships OASIS formed were twenty-five years ago. OASIS has been fortunate to create long-lasting, working relationships between sectors that seemed unlikely partners at the time. These public/private partnerships paired the non-profit world with hospitals, universities, businesses and government agencies at both national and local levels. The results have helped OASIS and these organizations meet the needs of seniors.
- A perfect example was in 1984 when a national department store agreed to partner in the pilot grant from which OASIS started. Later, the same company agreed to partner with OASIS to expand the program nationally and the two entities have enjoyed a 25 year, mutually beneficial relationship that still exists today.
- By providing dedicated space inside the department stores, OASIS offered a familiar, safe, vibrant and intergenerational environment in which to offer classes. The department store is simply one example of any number of other locations that might serve the same purposes when forming creative relationships between private and public sectors. Community centers, universities, libraries, retirement homes, assisted living centers, even common areas in hospitals can be excellent environments in which creative programming can be delivered.
- OASIS has forged unique partnerships like these in our centers all over the United States. Together with our diverse and numerous partners, we have proven that the possibilities for collaboration are endless and go far beyond physical space.

- Our collaboration with AT&T is another wonderful example of this. In 2006, the AT&T Foundation made a \$1 million grant supporting our efforts to involve volunteers in making technology education available to a broader audience.

We're told that OASIS helped redefine conventional wisdom about aging, giving us an excellent foundation to build for the future. In the U.S., we have an unprecedented opportunity in the coming decade: 76 million people will be approaching retirement. This dramatic increase in the older population will give us the greatest opportunity ever to engage more people in exciting and challenging intergenerational collaborations that benefit both participants and our society.

I am grateful to be a part of this most important discussion on such a global scale. In a civil society, keeping older adults involved, vibrant and contributing to their communities only strengthens the image of aging. It has a positive impact not only on the individuals, but also on their families, the communities and society as a whole.

Thank you for allowing me to share the OASIS story with you. It is my hope that parts of our story, especially the intergenerational programs, can be helpful to you as we face the same challenges.