

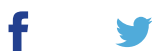
At NoHo Senior Arts Colony, it's never too late to be creative

Angela McEwan, a resident of the NoHo Senior Arts Colony, shares a poem she wrote in the colony's poetry class for senior citizens.



By **Hailey Branson-Potts**

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The NoHo Senior Arts Colony is a North Hollywood apartment complex for creative older people

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Jean Ritchie is chasing stardom.

The blond, blue-eyed actress fills her days with auditions and acting classes. She's got new head shots, a new acting reel and dreams of seeing herself on television.

It's an act that came later for Ritchie than for most. The starlet is 69.

To hone her acting, Ritchie moved into the NoHo Senior Arts Colony, a North Hollywood apartment complex for creative older people. She landed a casting agent with the help of a neighbor and attends Shakespeare classes in the urban-hip, loft-style senior living facility.

Her neighbors include a World War II veteran taking up poetry, septuagenarians learning how to dance and gray-haired painters.

"I moved here to get my career going," said Ritchie, who spent her younger years as a stay-at-home mom in Oregon.

Ritchie and her neighbors are part of a generational shift in how aging Americans are spending their retirement years. Today's seniors are living longer and increasingly trading leisurely retirements for an active lifestyle, lifelong learning and so-called encore careers, experts say.

More than 10,000 baby boomers turn 65 in America each day, many healthy enough to still do meaningful work for decades, said Marc Freedman, the founder of Encore.org, a San Francisco-based nonprofit that helps older people find second careers.

The more-active, more-engaged boomers are actually a throwback to earlier times in America when people tended to work until they couldn't. It's only in the last century — with the creation of Social Security and the establishment of a general retirement age — that people began to embrace retirement as a chance to slow down, Freedman said.

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The concept of the golden years lasted exactly one generation because it turns out sitting on the front porch in a rocking chair ... isn't all it's cracked up to be.

— Andrew Carle, founding director of the Program in Senior Housing Administration at George Mason University

But that attitude has changed dramatically, and senior housing is now reflecting the shift.

Leisure World in Orange County dumped its name as being too sedentary, and as Laguna Woods Village offers basketball leagues, a club for foodies and sessions for those interested in publishing e-books. In Texas, an assisted living community for RV enthusiasts allows residents to live in their own vehicles. There's even talk of building a retirement community for nudists in Florida, said Andrew Carle, founding

director of the Program in Senior Housing Administration at George Mason University.

And there is a growing demand for university-based retirement communities, which tout their proximity to colleges, where residents can take classes and spend their days on campus. There are about four dozen such communities with formal connections to academic institutions, a number Carle expects to triple by 2030.

Baby boomers are the most educated generation in U.S. history, so it's not surprising they want to be intellectually stimulated, active and surrounded by people of all ages, said Carle, 55. Studies show that people over 65 who regularly participate in arts programs report better health, take fewer medications and have lower rates of depression.

"The concept of the golden years lasted exactly one generation because it turns out sitting on the front porch in a rocking chair and watching the sun go down isn't all it's cracked up to be," Carle said.

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The NoHo Senior Arts Colony is a red-and-white, loft-style building where the mail room is labeled "Fan Mail Room" and banners outside say "Live to Write" and "Live to Perform." Nestled in the NoHo Arts District, the 2-year-old colony has a sound studio next door, a dance studio up the street and numerous theaters around the neighborhood.

The mixed-income colony is one of three arts-focused senior apartment complexes built in Los Angeles County by L.A.-based Meta Housing Corp. in partnership with EngAGE, a nonprofit that provides arts programming for seniors. Residents must be at least 62 to live there.

Tim Carpenter, the founder of EngAGE, said senior housing has long been lackluster and has failed to keep older people intellectually stimulated.

"It's all bingo and doughnuts, and when people talked about doing arts in senior housing, it was gluing macaroni necklaces," he said. "It's like we become kindergartners again."

Carpenter grew up near the Yaddo artists' colony in New York and remembered peeking through the window, wondering what the creative types at the dinner table were talking about. It was that sense of artistic communion he hoped to capture at NoHo.

For 63-year-old Graciela Lovera, an actress and former Peruvian paratrooper, the intellectual culture has given her renewed life. She lived in a different retirement community before moving into the arts colony and became depressed seeing other residents sitting idle during the day.

"It's good to think. It's good to get out and get involved," she said, "because if you don't, you're not going to enjoy life, and it's going to be a painful thing."

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The North Hollywood complex has a professional performing arts theater and a packed calendar of free classes, including a drum circle, graphic design and watercolor painting. The classes are challenging — and are intended to be.

A recent Shakespeare class had students clapping out the beat of iambic pentameter to some of the playwright's most famous lines.

In a creative dance class, resident Bert Sanders waved a pink scarf over her head and shimmied around the room, jiggling her hips to the sound of a drum. Sanders' teacher tells her it should help with her balance in everyday life.

An 85-year-old instructor with shoulder-length white hair urged those in his poetry class to listen carefully to a vinyl recording of Welsh poet Dylan Thomas reading a poem.

"He speaks so smoothly ... but it took him hours to produce one line," the instructor, Morgan Gibson, told the class. "He'd revise and revise."

Lucius Fisher Foster III, a 93-year-old World War II pilot with thick black glasses and an ornery grin, nodded.

"I do the same thing, only I don't do it as well," said Foster, who took up poetry after moving into the building. As they went around the classroom, each student reading his or her latest work, there seemed a theme to the words: Aging. When it came to him, Foster touched on it too:

I stand upon the corner, my Walker by my side.

Observing all the life forms as they go tripping by.

After a modern acting class wrapped up on a recent afternoon, a few of the students lingered in the library, where they said you can often hear residents practicing their lines.

Carol Egen, a retired physical therapist who now does stand-up comedy, tried out a bawdy new joke she planned to tell at a theater down the street.

"I'm just doing five minutes," she explained.

Jean Ritchie, the actress, held up her hand and stopped Egen.

"I'm going to correct you," Ritchie said. "Take out the 'just.' You're not *just* doing five minutes. You tell people, 'I'm going to do the most marvelous five-minute set.'"

Egen smiled and thanked her friend. That kind of support was why she moved here.

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