

# Silver Century Foundation

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## Features

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## Trading the Porch Rocker for Poetry: How Tim Carpenter Is Inspiring Creative Aging

By [Leigh Ann Hubbard](#)

*This article is the second in our series on the future of aging: interviews with people who are experts in their fields and are also visionaries. We're asking them to talk about what they believe will happen in the years ahead to change the experience of aging.*

*If all goes according to Tim Carpenter's plan, the future will be full of engaged older people who look at the world creatively and who are considered integral parts of their communities. Through arts programs and celebrated "senior artists' colonies," he's helping this future come to pass.*

When you're talking to Tim Carpenter about how he envisions the future of old age, at some point it strikes you: he's talking about older people as ... people. They're not "seniors." They're not "the 62-and-older crowd." They're not ... other.

And this makes you think of how often older people are automatically pictured in a rocking chair. When you say 82-year-old, the first thing that comes to most people's minds doesn't seem to be painter, writer, student or mentor.

But that's exactly what Carpenter sees.

To him, retirement is a beginning. It's like college: a chance for discovery and impact. He believes this is the natural order of things. Our culture is just out of step with "normal," as he puts it.

So he's working to set us right. Through his nonprofit organization, EngAGE, which connects older people to both the arts and their communities, he's manifesting a future where older adults aren't shuffled away to apartments with kitchenettes and bingo nights. They're creating. They're affecting. They're ... important.

### Inspired through Friendship

In the mid-1990s, Carpenter was frustrated. As a health care administrator, he was developing primary care practices in Southern California that were targeted to older people. The clinics were meant to improve management of the patients' care. But change was slow and bureaucracy was big.

"I just don't think the business was, at that moment, prime for innovation," he says.

Then he found a business that was.

Carpenter met John Huskey, founder of Meta Housing Corporation, who was developing traditional senior housing communities but had, like Carpenter, come to a place in his life where he wanted to make a change.

"He ended up being both a mentor and someone who listened to me at the same time," Carpenter says.

"What I was doing was asking questions. So I walked into my first independent senior housing community. And what I noticed was there was a lack of connection. There was a lack of community. There was a lack of things going on."

One day, he visited a clubhouse at one of these places. A calendar on the wall listed activities like bingo and doughnuts. He struck up a conversation with a resident.

"He told me his life story, which was really, really interesting," Carpenter says. "At the end of it, I was thinking, 'You're amazing; what are you doing here?' And he just said, 'I'm dying.'"

"That was the moment where I said, I really think I'm going to create some way to change this. So I just started tinkering away at it."

Drawing on skills from his earlier work as a journalist and a copywriter, Carpenter launched a writing class at an independent living community. The class culminated in the students performing their work on stage. The housing community where he taught it filled up within a few months.

## From Class to Colony

In 1999, inspired in part by that first class, Carpenter founded EngAGE (then called More Than Shelter for Seniors). Today, this nonprofit organization provides free, college-style arts programs at over 30 senior-living communities throughout Southern California. Especially targeted to people with low incomes, classes are given on a semester basis. They're open not just to residents of the housing communities but to anyone in the surrounding area who's 55 or older, as long as there's room. Each class culminates in a special event, such as a play, musical performance or art show.

The events are as much about engaging with the community as about students showcasing their skills. They often take place in nontraditional venues to shake up preconceived notions.

"We've done poetry slams in wine bars where young people go to have yuppie food," Carpenter says. "They see this group of 70- and 80-year-olds get up and start reading poetry. It just breaks the mold."

In 2005, Carpenter and Huskey teamed up to develop an independent living community that centered around the arts rather than old age. At the now-thriving Burbank Senior Artists Colony, amenities include studios, performance spaces and a sculpture garden. There's an independent film company, a music program and an intergenerational arts program with the Burbank Unified School District.

When the colony opened, it made the cover of the Sunday *New York Times*.

"It was the most emailed article for three weeks in the world," Carpenter says. "I was shocked."

He realized the colony was giving people a different way to think about their own old age. The story's popularity wasn't about, "Would I put my mom there?" he says. It was about, "Wow, I could live there."

His arts programs got a scientific boost in 2006 when the National Endowment for the Arts and the Center on Aging, Health & Humanities at the George Washington University released a report based on their two-year *Creativity and Aging Study*. The organizations hailed [the study](#) as the first of its kind to compare the health of older people in professionally conducted, community-based arts programs with the health of older people who weren't in such programs. The study included 300 people ages 65 to 103.

The researchers found that, overall, people in the arts programs had more positive health outcomes than people who weren't in the programs. For example, after a year the arts students reported a greater increase in overall health, a greater reduction in doctor visits and less of an increase in medication usage. The study also found potential, positive impacts on morale and depression.

"The significance of the art programs is that they foster sustained involvement because of their beauty and productivity," the report says. "They keep the participants involved week after week, compounding positive effects being achieved."

EngAGE and Meta Housing Corporation now have three artists' colonies in California. Through EngAGE's programs, older people learn directly from professional artists and art teachers. They explore painting and drawing. They sing, dance and cook. They mentor young people. And they work to improve the future by changing the culture today.

We talked with Carpenter about his vision for that future.

### **SCF: As we get older, do you think we get more creative—or better at our creative pursuits?**

TC: I'm not sure we get better at creativity but maybe more receptive to it.

Not that long ago we thought, we are who we are, and then we age, and what happens, happens. What we're seeing now is, as people either continue to engage in certain types of behavior or start to engage, it has pretty drastic effects on their health, both physical and mental.

What we've always believed [at EngAGE] is that if you [are exposed] to exciting opportunities to engage in creativity or lifelong learning or anything that really turns the mind on, it has effects on your mental health, because you have this sense of purpose and learning and engagement and a reason. And then on the physical side, you're able to achieve behavioral change [that benefits your physical health] in a much easier way.

Creativity opens up a lot of pathways. And the seniors that we're dealing with in our model are World War II generation or early baby boomer generation, and some of them have never really had an opportunity to pursue this for whatever reason. I'm sure they've been working their whole lives and they have families. They don't see themselves as artists. Yet I think that there's something that appeals to everyone by being creative, whether it be learning to be an oil painter, or making a little film, or developing a plot of garden [or] cooking creatively. The cool thing about creativity is it can be applied to almost anything. It's a way of looking at the world.

### **SCF: In the future, if the country is filled with perfect communities for older people, what do they look like? Are they all like the Burbank Senior Artists Colony, or do some people have different needs than access to the arts?**

TC: To me, it's not necessarily about building the perfect senior housing community. It's about changing the way people think about [aging] altogether—to value it as a new experience and a place in life where I'm going to have all these opportunities because I know that other people have done it.

Building a place like the senior artists' colony helps to move that dial back to some sense of normal. But better is, if I live in the *city* of Burbank, the *city* of Burbank would look at aging in a new way, because we've shined a little flashlight on what's possible and how these people can actually be an important [part of the] fabric of the community.

We throw around words in the aging world like sage and respect and wisdom and dignity, and I think half the people who work in my business have no idea what any of those things means. There's this sense that, ooh, they're old people, and let's put them on a dais and bring them grapes and make their older years easy and bountiful and fruitful. And I think what people really want inside is just to have [old age] be a next phase of their life and have the same kind of exciting opportunity that they had when they were 30 or 40 or 50.

But it's about all ages. It's not necessarily about saying this is the way we treat seniors, and this is the way we treat kids, and, you know, this is the way we treat teachers or gas station attendants. It's about how do you create a sense of community where you live—and feel like you're connected to something and that you're a part of something greater than yourself.

**SCF: So the idyllic future has many more aspects to it than just communities for older people.**

TC: Yeah. And I think communities for older people should be built next to schools in the middle of town where they can walk to things. If you look at the retirement housing, there's this huge pendulum swing towards let's just move to the middle of nowhere on a golf course with this sea of old people and you get a golf cart and a view. And then you're 70. And if you die five years later that's great, because I just can't imagine living on a golf course doing nothing for more than a weekend. *[Laughs.]* It's just a bad idea. Maybe some people like that. I just think that we need to look at a much more expansive way of creating communities that are age friendly and exciting and catalyze the next phase of life.

**SCF: When you think about making your vision come true, are there some logistical challenges we need to overcome?**

TC: Yes. And I think we know what all of them are. Some of them I mentioned.

As we get older and as our needs increase, there's the independent, healthy population; there are people who are becoming frail; obviously dementia and Alzheimer's are a huge issue. So you have this combination of health care issues and transportation and socialization—educating the public on what this means.

I live in Los Angeles. To me, it's interesting that I chose this place to do this because it's the heart of darkness for getting older.

**SCF: True.**

TC: *[Laughs.]* I live in the mecca for anti-aging and youth culture. So that's one of the things that needs to be looked at really carefully and unwound. [When you address that], people stop being afraid of aging and dying; people are much more willing to engage at every age.

**SCF: You've said Burbank has been greatly affected as a community by the artists' colony there.**

TC: Burbank is a relatively small town within Los Angeles, and [the colony has] had huge impact there because of that—because people know what it is. We have community programs with schools, and we've created a community garden next door, and we've had our residents performing on stages and in libraries. We've made films. We've done radio shows.

It's about changing perception. And part of that is just making people look at it and say, "Wow, that's something that's cool. I could do that." And then they want to know more. We have events, and people come to them. It really creates a ripple effect that's almost immeasurable on a community.

**SCF: Do you plan to spread EngAGE's services wider than Southern California?**

TC: We're looking at ways to try and replicate what we've done. We have put together kind of a how-to on what we've done. I've done a lot of speaking engagements in the last few years. And I've been approached by a lot of grantmakers and foundations to try and find ways to get organizations to do what we do in different communities. So we're trying to find ways to do that.

**SCF: Traditionally, our culture has talked about aging as a winding down process. You just kind of sit on the front porch. But your vision says, no, life continues.**

TC: I think people who want to sit on the porch probably always enjoyed sitting on the porch. I don't think that's a large representation of the human population. *[Laughs.]* I don't know a lot of people who like to sit on the porch.

I have nothing against sitting on the porch. I've never done it myself, and I don't want to do it when I retire.

I would like to jog up and down the porch steps maybe. And talk to my neighbor. Listen to a ball game and have a beer or something like that.

But I think people need to step back and say, we've had 50, 60, 70 years of figuring out our life and how it works, and all this is an extension of that and hopefully a period of growth: what more can I do?

*This interview was edited for clarity and length.*

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## Featured Article Author

[Leigh Ann Hubbard](#) enjoys exploring topics in fresh, unique ways. She's been a freelance writer, editor, and website consultant for over 10 years. She specializes in aging and health and has worked for such varied outlets as CNN, Fairbanks Memorial Hospital, and [The Survival Doctor](#). When not writing, she enjoys fencing, singing and eating fried green tomatoes whenever she can get her hands on them.

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