



An African drumming circle

At Willamette Oaks in Eugene, Oregon, the drumming circle's biggest draws are its sociable nature and its lack of gender discrimination. 'Both men and women feel equally welcome in our circle,' comments facilitator Candy Davis

promotes active aging at
Willamette Oaks

A nontraditional activity offers multidimensional wellness benefits (and a real workout!) for active, independent older adults at this family-owned retirement community



This is the sixth article in a series profiling the recipients of the 2010 ICAA Innovators Awards. Launched by the International Council on Active Aging® (ICAA) in 2003, these awards recognize creativity and excellence in active aging, honoring innovations that are leading the way, setting new standards and making a difference in the lives of older adults. These offerings target any or all of the seven dimensions of wellness—namely, physical, spiritual, intellectual, social, emotional, vocational and environmental wellness. ICAA supports professionals who develop wellness facilities, programs and services for adults ages 50 and over.

Willamette Oaks Retirement Community is a complex of apartments for “people who love life,” according to its motto. Located alongside the Willamette River in Eugene, Oregon, the community “strives to provide a stimulating environment that offers meaningful opportunities for older adults to stay mentally, physically, and socially fit and engaged with life,” says former Programs and Events Coordinator Candy Davis. “Residents can choose from a daily menu of professionally led fitness classes—from tai chi and Hawaiian dance to weight lifting and fall recovery—as well as individual coaching in the use of modern exercise equipment.” They also socialize and interact through “resident-led parties, card games, films, discussions, meetings, holiday observances, and excursions.”

In 2007, Davis expanded residents’ options with the launch of an African drumming circle. At the time, she was looking for avenues to incorporate all seven of the dimensions in ICAA’s wellness model (see above). “I happened to take an African drumming class and quickly realized it was a gold mine of opportunity,” Davis comments, so starting with four cardboard drums, she offered a class as an experiment. “It took a while to become the hottest thing on the circuit,” she says. “But I stuck with it, and the diligence paid off.”

Recently, Davis left Willamette Oaks to form Primal Rhythms, a company that provides rhythm, drumming and sounding circles in a variety of settings, although she continues to facilitate the community’s drumming group. The *Journal on Active Aging*® recently asked Davis to tell us more about this program and what it involves.

JAA: Please describe Willamette Oaks’ drumming circle for readers.

CD: Once a week, the African Drumming Team, 25 strong, takes over the

dining room and fills the air with beats from foreign lands. We are lucky to count among our number a few extended community members as well as Willamette Oaks staff members, who show up every week to learn and play with us. Our circle focuses on traditional favorites from West Africa, South Africa and Brazil, but we never turn up our noses at any catchy rhythm that presents itself.

We usually open with a group jam. We then dive into a short exploration of the next new-to-us piece, which may consist of up to five drum parts played at the same time, and an accompanying song. Recently, we have added a modified African dance class to our circle to fold in yet another essential aspect of African music. The hour-and-a-half session finishes with a run through the repertoire of ensembles we’ve already mastered. And when we get going, we really make the dust rise!

One of the most crucial parts of this group is community outreach, which has evolved into a form of what author Jean Huston terms *social artistry*.¹ Once or twice a month, we pack up our drums and go on the road. Our destination is usually a local school, where we invite the children, parents, teachers and staff to join us in experimenting with rhythm, creating community, and making a personal connection with our elders in a facilitated drum circle. Residents have learned to provide confident leadership for young people in a loud, chaotic and unpredictable environment full of laughter, surprise and movement. That’s good for promoting active aging at any stage of the life cycle.

JAA: What does your drumming circle incorporate to offer participants meaningful experiences that promote wellness?

CD: The biggest draw is the **social** nature of the group and its lack of gen-

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Willamette Oaks' African Drumming Team welcomes students into the circle during visits to local schools. Recently, after receiving a cash award, the group voted unanimously to donate it to help fund a school's struggling world music education program

der discrimination. Both men and women feel equally welcome in our circle. Drumming is about paying close attention to other people without having to make conversation. We communicate instead through rhythm, facial expression, and gesture, the most universal and basic components of human interaction. Once we get all five rhythms of a "song" going at once, people find that they must not only concentrate on playing their own parts, but they also must watch and listen carefully to all the others to feel the satisfaction of experiencing themselves as part of an ensemble. As a result, their ability to pay attention for extended periods of time increases dramatically.

We all recognize and crave that sense of working together to create a strong pattern that transcends our individual human frailty and fear. Being part of a

group of three assigned to hold down an important rhythm amid a whirl of sound allows people to make a significant **contribution** and encourages a heightened sense of worth.

Drumming is great **physical exercise**, too. I incorporate practice in breathing, stretching, yoga, vocalization, smiling, and improved posture during each session. Drummers find that they quickly gain strength and coordination along with a positive awareness of their physical capabilities. By building special light drums and providing a variety of small percussion instruments, I also make it easy for people to participate regardless of any disability.

The **spiritual** and **emotional** elements of drumming are clear. For that hour and a half, the intense concentration and

interaction allow people to forget their worries while they immerse themselves in a taste of Africa. I've coached the group to express their emotions freely, and they have responded with a huge jump in self-confidence that affects other areas of their lives. My frequent reminders to smile, cheer loudly and breathe not only improve oxygen uptake in team members, but foster a positive self-image that they carry away with them.

Those who have tried African drumming know what a "mind-melting" experience it can be to coordinate, remember and execute complex patterns that require a specific variety of movements. This exercise incorporates physical movement and intense **intellectual** engagement. In fact, drumming has been proven to increase brain plasticity.²

Finally, the drummers find the instruments gorgeous and exciting to handle, which lifts people out of any settling gloom and makes them more **aware of their environment**.

JAA: *How did you introduce the African drumming circle to residents and staff of Willamette Oaks, and how was the program received?*

CD: I worked hard to make residents, management and staff aware of the seven dimensions of wellness as defined by ICAA. I talked up the benefits of any activity that was great exercise while being a huge amount of fun. "Anybody with a pulse can play a drum," I told the community during the weekly Town Hall Meeting. I also showed them a colorful drum. The initial reception was tentative, but there were a few open-minded

residents who I knew were willing to try anything. I contacted them personally to fan the flames.

JAA: *What did you do to build acceptance, interest and participation in your drumming circle?*

CD: I put the class on the fitness schedule. Four people showed up—a small group, but I was not discouraged. None of them had ever tried anything so strange, but they thought it was fun, and they kept showing up week after week. Despite joking that their brains were melting, the drummers got a kick out of learning the new rhythms, and they were amazed by the power of the sound they were able to produce. Word got around that intense learning like this builds brain structure and improves memory.² Participants also started talking about

drumming at dinner, and invited their friends. Before long, the group had grown too large for the space.

I continued to advertise the connection between drumming and wellness, while our drum circle excursions made us famous in the local media. The drummers looked forward to our gigs and enthused about the group to other residents. We even developed a group handshake. It really took off from there. I still make the most of our recent successes, such as our 2010 ICAA Innovators Award and our August 2011 first prize Best Senior Band award at the citywide Eugene Celebration Parade event.

JAA: *How do broader participation, school visits and guest instructors enrich the experience, in your view?*

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'We are fortunate to have a whole cadre of white-haired bass drummers with arms of steel, who keep the complex melodic line going on the big dununbas drums,' says Candy Davis, who started Willamette Oaks' drumming circle program in 2007

CD: The residents' emotional experience is validated when they see outsiders and staff express interest by making an effort to attend every week. Residents view drumming as a co-created environment that makes them feel powerful and "in the swing of life." It's great for staff cohesion, too. Staff can leave frustration and fatigue outside the circle, participating on an equal footing with each other and the residents. Often, staff with less drumming experience must learn new rhythms from the residents, who feel recognized for the knowledge they've gained.

Most older adults crave meaningful participation with all age groups in a natural environment. Schools are the perfect venue for our visits. To see the school kitchen staff get out in the middle of the circle and boogie to our lively Samba gives residents a real kick. They often get up and join in, beckoning the students to jump in, too.

The guest instructors I've invited to Willamette Oaks are outstanding teachers in the world beat drumming and dance community. We have taken excursions to local concerts and events in which these well-known cultural artists appear, so when they come to lead a class, residents show their deep respect with rapt attention and impressive performance level. Such events also allow residents a close encounter with people of highly disparate cultures, languages and outlooks.

JAA: *What challenges have you encountered with your drumming circle, and how have you addressed them?*

CD: The biggest challenge has been convincing residents to try despite their fear of failure. Of course, the human brain likes to maintain self-identity at all costs, and for people with no musical training, it's difficult to get past the "I can't" circuitry. I've addressed this with personal contact, encouragement

Facilitating a successful drumming circle in a retirement community setting: five key steps

1. Acquaint management with the seven dimensions of wellness as defined by ICAA, if necessary. Demonstrate to the management team how rhythm events promote wellness by incorporating all seven aspects.
2. Urge management to commit to actively supporting and encouraging participation in the drum circle by the entire community, including residents, staff, families and outside participants.
3. Find a facilitator with the passion and skills to lead as well as provide structure for the group.
4. Provide a wide variety of authentic instruments from around the world, allowing participants to choose those that best suit their physical abilities and social comfort level.
5. Include public outreach through visiting cultural artists and community members, as well as rhythm encounters with people of all ages.

and example. Teaching individuals a few basic techniques and rhythms opens the way for them to touch and experience the drum. I've also given people the opportunity to take an unobtrusive role until they feel safe enough to step into the limelight.

Another big hurdle is the desire for perfection and the perception that "if I'm not already perfect at a task, I shouldn't try." Team drummers have worked hard to break down their own expectations of perfection and to develop "beginner's

mind.” They have been able to translate that changed perception to other life situations with an understanding that they can develop expertise in any new endeavor if they give it some time and practice. Allaying unreasonable expectations of perfection is difficult for a facilitator. Offering starter rhythms and an array of small, easy-to-play percussion seems to help.

In addition, I have been careful to reiterate from the beginning that we are not a performing group. Our purpose is social artistry—using our skills to create an avenue of communication and understanding that would otherwise not exist. We serve the community. Maintaining that definition goes a long way toward canceling any fear of failure.

JAA: Finally, how does the African drumming circle advance active aging and wellness at Willamette Oaks?

CD: The team gets a great deal of satisfaction out of shooting down the concept of ageism by showing that older adults can not only master new and difficult skills, but also extend themselves to share that achievement with the surrounding community in a deeply meaningful way. Older adults are capable of innovation, focus and important contributions to society. We provide an encouraging example to other residents, as well as the world at large. 🌀

The Journal on Active Aging thanks Candy Davis, of Primal Rhythms, for her help with this article. Davis can be reached by email at tricanis@willamette.net. For

further information about Willamette Oaks Retirement Community, visit www.willametteoaks.com.

[**Ed.** Discover more about the benefits of drumming circles and tips for getting started in Candy Davis’s article, “Who’s got rhythm? Drumming as a vehicle for wellness,” published in the January/February 2011 issue of the *Journal on Active Aging*.]

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Images courtesy of Candy Davis



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