



*(L to r), Childhood friends
Carmel Abbot and Evie
Glieberman team up at the
2005 Serendipity showcase.
Photo: C N C Studio*

Serendipity: celebrating Chicago's seniors on stage

The artistic talents of age 60-plus men and women are displayed in this annual showcase, launched by a private-public partnership to benefit older adults in the Windy City

by Terry Fay, BA

Eddie Sullivan struts across the stage in a crisp tuxedo, his clear voice backed by a 16-piece orchestra, captivating thousands in the audience at the grand Chicago Theatre. He's a doorman by day—and an encored sensation at Serendipity: Celebrating Chicago's Seniors on Stage.

Next up are the Syncopated Seniors, a septuplet of tap dancers whose long legs flash beneath their short skirts. Not until the performers take a final bow does the audience learn that Nadine

Washington, who took her first tap lesson at age 78, is 86 years-*young*.

Both professional and previously undiscovered performers make up the 22 cast members of this year's Serendipity cabaret. The popular event, launched by Chicago's Department on Aging and retirement-community developer Senior Lifestyle Corporation, draws a full house for 2 days of matinee shows. Also in 2006, Serendipity's third year, the showcase raises more than \$400,000 through its annual benefit performance for Meals on Wheels Chicago, a nonprofit organization that delivers meals to homebound older adults.

"I am captivated and inspired by watching the years fade away, as these performers share songs, dances and dramatic readings that mirror their passion for life," says Bill Kaplan, founder of Serendipity and chairman of Senior Lifestyle Corporation. "My world revolves around seniors, so I love this opportunity to celebrate the energy and talent they have to offer."

Kaplan and his wife, Carol, first considered creating a large-scale older-adult production in Chicago in 2003. Active in senior housing since 1985, they had witnessed the popularity of big-band performances at the communities they own and manage. The couple's imagination took flight after seeing the Fabulous Palm Springs Follies, a cabaret show in California that has featured older performers for more than 15 years.

"These seniors were the most beautiful people in the most glamorous costumes," says Carol Kaplan, president of Serendipity Seniors on Stage. "For the audience, age is not a consideration, and by the end of the show, it is such a shock to realize these amazing performers are grandparents."

The Kaplans soon began laying plans to introduce such a show to Chicago.

Forming partnerships

As a first step, Bill Kaplan sought advice and support from city agencies. Connections he had built several years earlier, while working with the city to create affordable senior housing, helped him begin conversations with officials such as Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley.

"When I suggested bringing the Fabulous Palm Springs Follies to Chicago, Mayor Daley said we didn't need to bring in outside talent, because our city has enough talent of its own," says Kaplan. "My challenge was then to create a showcase that would benefit a variety of Chicago seniors—those who could perform, those who could attend, and those who could do neither because of poverty or disability."

But Kaplan knew he couldn't do it alone, especially while expanding his senior housing business, which is among the leading senior living specialists in the United States. So he called on wife Carol to spearhead the project. She joined forces with Joyce Gallagher, commissioner of the Department on Aging, to lead Serendipity as cochair of a committee that would grow to more than 30 active members by 2006.

With the *pro bono* help of lawyer Jon Vegosen of Funkhouser Vegosen Liebman & Dunn, Carol Kaplan established Serendipity Seniors on Stage as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization in spring 2003. Lending his expertise further, Vegosen joined the fledgling organization's board of directors.

Although she had never worked professionally in nonprofits or theater, Mrs. Kaplan began conversations with anyone she thought might be helpful or interested in the cause—her daughter's

former high school theater director, friends who worked in the media, and people with good networks or skills. "The Senior Lifestyle staff and other volunteers added hours to their workdays, and if anyone had a good idea, we went for it," she says. "We chose the name Serendipity because it refers to good fortune, and each day we had the good fortune to find people willing and able to make a difference."

Cultural Affairs Commissioner Lois Weisberg, later named honorary chair of the benefit committee, used her connections to help secure a legendary city stage for the production. With Weisberg's help, Mrs. Kaplan began talking with various venues and learned that The Chicago Theatre was transferring ownership in April 2004. The new owner, New York-based TheatreDreams, was eager to build relationships in the Windy City and agreed to donate space for a few weekdays each May.

Meanwhile, Commissioner Gallagher involved the Department on Aging in organizing bus service, giving any older person within the city limits free transportation to a matinee. She also spoke with the city's commissioner for cable television, who helped arrange to broadcast the cabaret. "A private-public partnership working together can do wonderful things," comments Gallagher. "It's important to have people with credibility able and willing to reach out to diverse communities."

From year to year, Serendipity has expanded its community outreach through Meals on Wheels Chicago. "Our production is a showcase for active, energetic seniors, but its fundraiser benefits those who are the most isolated and frail," notes Bill Kaplan, who also serves as Meals on Wheels

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The tap-dancing Syncopated Seniors light up the stage at Serendipity 2006, as Chris Dimas (right) sings "Sway." Photo: C N C Studio

president. "The hundreds who contribute their time, talent and creative zest to this show make life brighter for people in great need of help and support."

Teaming with talent

Just as the Fabulous Palm Springs Follies amazed the Kaplans, the professionalism and Broadway quality of Serendipity shows continue to surprise and impress many sponsors and audience members, according to the cabaret's artistic production team.

"By the time the curtain goes up, the show is extremely professional," says Joyce Sloane, producer emeritus of the famed Second City improvisational comedy troupe and a founder of the Chicago Academy for the Arts. "Although some performers are beginners on stage, we help them look and perform like professionals."

Sloane, 75, serves as a board member and chair of the 2-day audition process held in February. "When they called me 3 years ago to tell me about Serendipity, I thought it was a terrific idea," says Sloane, recipient of this year's Serendipity Lifetime Achievement Award. "I like to do anything I can to

encourage seniors to continue working and pursuing their interests."

While Sloane volunteers her time, other renowned Chicago artists are hired to create the show. Director Estelle Spector, head of musical theater at Columbia College, leads rehearsals at least 3 times a week for nearly 2 months before opening. Together with musical director Allan Kaye, founder of Allan Kaye Orchestras, Spector chooses material suitable for each artist and group to perform, while award-winning choreographer Marla Lampert helps people learn dance numbers ranging from tap to ballroom.

Alan Salzenstein, coordinator of DePaul University's Performing Arts Management program, produces the show and serves as a committee member. "We begin working on Serendipity in October," says Salzenstein, adding that "the intensity builds as we get closer to the event. Each year we try to find new talent and improve the quality of the show."

Quinton de Alexander introduced custom-designed costuming to Serendipity, after he stumbled across a dance act from the show while channel

surfing at home. He began by securing donated tuxedos and went on to design original gowns for the women. "While not all the performers can afford glamorous costumes, I make sure they get them," says de Alexander. "It's a lot of work," he admits, "but I really love the look on their faces when they come out with rhinestones and feathers, looking like they're going to the Oscars."

Despite the long hours of work from rehearsal to final performance, Serendipity cast members also enjoy the experience. The pleasure and excitement of appearing in the production, and the camaraderie of all involved, encourage many to return each year to try out for the show.

Pursuing the dream

Nearly 100 performers auditioned for Serendipity in 2006, presenting acts as varied as song-and-dance, belly dancing, rap and storytelling. Senior Lifestyle Corporation advertises the annual auditions at its Chicago facilities, and a volunteer committee sends alerts and fliers to churches, newspapers and community centers. In addition, past performers and older adults who request audition details through the Department on Aging receive telephone calls.

Of the individuals who tried out this year, 22 were chosen to perform in the show's dozen or so acts. All Serendipity artists appear for no fee, including professionals. Some go on to perform at other events sponsored by the Department on Aging.

"We hope Serendipity inspires seniors to keep going and follow their dreams," says Spector. "If they didn't get in the show this time, we encourage them to spend the year working on their

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Eight steps to staging a successful older-adult showcase

1. Involve city officials and agencies such as mayors or other local representatives connected to older-adult issues, and city or state departments on aging, community affairs, etc. They will have access to older adults, public services, and people who can help make the production a hit.
2. Set up a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation. This process, which may take several months, is best undertaken by an attorney. Here are 4 reasons to consider incorporating:
 - a. Your group won't pay income tax if you make a profit.
 - b. Your group is not likely to qualify for any public or private grants without tax-exempt status.
 - c. Donors can deduct gifts on their federal and state income tax returns.
 - d. Nonprofit members and directors are generally protected from personal liability if the group is the target of a lawsuit.
3. Book venues to stage the production and hold rehearsals. Look for venues that might donate space; if that is not an option, ask about price breaks for nonprofits. Remember to consider accessibility.
4. Leverage your connections to identify backers, producers and artistic coordinators willing to donate their time, and provide a volunteer support team to assist. Examples of areas where volunteers are extremely useful include:
 - a. publicity/advertising
 - b. invitations
 - c. transportation
 - d. food/beverage
5. Hold well-publicized auditions at least 3 months before the event. Include announcements in local newspaper calendars, at senior communities throughout the area, on public bulletin boards at churches, libraries and community centers, etc.
6. Promote the production through the local media. Solicit *pro bono* work from public relations professionals to create a buzz about your show by writing and distributing news releases/alerts, and actively pitching human-interest stories about your performers, organizers and audience.
7. Arrange transportation to bring in your audience. Pack the house! Solicit local transportation companies, such as bus and cab companies, to provide free/low-cost transportation to and from senior communities.
8. Share the spotlight: Capitalize on your success to benefit other charitable causes.

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material, or audition for events at their local community center. We all need things to look forward to," she adds.

Sigmund Erber, 72, is a perfect example. Erber says that performing in the showcase spurred him on when he had heart surgery just months before his third Serendipity show. "I was bound and determined to get ready for Serendipity, and thinking of that goal gave me the drive to work out as much as possible to get the strength back," he explains. "I was 70 years-old when I was center stage at The Chicago Theatre for the first time, and I put the high I felt right up there with my marriage and my son's birth."

Other performers find unexpected benefits by joining the tight-knit cast. Evie Gliberman, 79, reunited with childhood friend Carmel Abbot, 81, at auditions in 2004. Last year, they sang "If They Could See Us Now," turning the number from *Sweet Charity* into a duet about their childhood as neighborhood singers. "We met after more than 50 years, and it was really terrific to perform together again," says Gliberman, who in the interim enjoyed a successful career as a professional singer and radio personality. "We've kept in touch ever since and gotten to know one another all over again."

Passing the torch(song)

In addition to providing a high-profile showcase for older adults such as Erber and Gliberman, Serendipity enriches the lives of young people. Each season the event gives a group of talented youngsters a role in the production process and an opportunity to interact with the *senior class* of performers. As well, every year Serendipity provides a scholarship to Chicago Academy for the Arts, a theater high school founded by Sloane, and a donation to After School Matters, a nonprofit organization offering art and education programs for

Chicago teens. Students from the arts academy perform a dance number at the benefit show, building a bridge to the next generation of talent.

"We feel that a great gap has emerged between young people and seniors in the United States," says Carol Kaplan. "We want to have young people both on stage and behind the scenes, building bonds with seniors and hearing their stories. Watching those relationships grow and flourish is a truly magical process," she adds, "and one that touches the hearts of all involved."

In the past, matinee performances have been reserved for older adults, but this year one show was open to the public at a ticket price of \$15, with underwriting by Blue Cross Blue Shield of Illinois. Children from a local Montessori school also attended the production free of charge.

"We hope to expand the inter-generational aspect to include an audience of all ages," says Michael Lerich, a committee member and major benefactor of the production. "Serendipity lets us look into a crystal ball at our own future and see that talent doesn't fade with time."

Raising the curtain

As the audience gathers for each performance, the Michael Lerich Orchestra launches into the overture against a backdrop of photographs—past and present—of Serendipity's featured singers, dancers, actors and musicians.

"My picture shows me costumed as a young mariachi singer and dancer, from the days when I performed all over Chicago and on television," smiles Raquel Ontiveros, 77, who sang a romantic duet from her native Mexico in this year's showcase. "I never thought I would perform on stage at The

Chicago Theatre," she says, "but I remember watching Frank Sinatra there when I was a teenager."

Each season Serendipity premieres with a benefit performance attended by corporate sponsors and individual ticket-buyers. The first benefit raised more than \$25,000 for the Department on Aging; since then, funds have been donated primarily to Meals on Wheels—more than \$50,000 in 2005 and \$125,000 in 2006.

The subsequent shows are weekday matinees for older adults. Men and women in their later years arrive downtown by the busload, dressed to the nines, some sharing memories of The Chicago Theatre. According to Commissioner Gallagher, more than 8,000 older adults attended 4 matinees in 2005, and the 2006 matinees were sold out by April. In the next year, the Serendipity committee will determine if a greater number of performances and buses, still free of charge, can be offered to these audiences in the future.

Elizabeth Senese, from the city's Southwest Side, attended one of last year's free matinees. "The show brought back memories and laughter for me," said Senese, "especially since this was my first time back to The Chicago Theatre in years. ... To think of the ages of these amazing people, and what they are doing, is incredible." ☺

Terry Fay, BA, is director of resident programs for Chicago-based Senior Lifestyle Corporation, a leading national provider of active living communities for older adults. She can be reached at TFay@senr.com.

Images courtesy of Serendipity Seniors on Stage