

Sages and Seekers organization promotes art education

By JOSEPH PATRICK DABU
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Rodrigo Riveros, a graduate student studying psychology, thinks access to artistic platforms and organizations should not be a luxury but rather are necessary for positive development in local communities.



“What the arts do so beautifully is actually provide you with the opportunity to think about yourself, your surroundings and how to make your society better,” Riveros said.

Riveros, a research assistant at the USC Brain and Creativity Institute, oversees an eight-week program in Los Angeles under the nonprofit Sages and Seekers. The organization promotes the art of conversation and storytelling by connecting adolescents, or “Seekers,” with senior citizens, the “Sages,” to address ageism in local communities.

Sages and Seekers is one of three projects partnered with USC that is funded by the National Endowment for the Arts in the 2017-18 fiscal year, according to NEA documents. At least 100 arts organizations and institutions in Los Angeles,

The nonprofit organization Sages and Seekers connects adolescent “Seekers” to senior citizen “Sages” for interaction, conversation and storytelling. Photo courtesy of Sages & Seekers.

including USC’s various research labs, have received grants from the NEA to further their missions.

The nonprofit was awarded \$90,000 last year to aid in the yearlong study of the program of which Riveros is a part. Mary Helen Immordino-Yang, a professor at the Rossier School of Education, and Elly Katz, the Sages and Seekers founder, applied and received an NEA Research: Art Works grant, which supports research that investigates the value and impact of the arts.

But programs like Sages and Seekers are currently facing an uncertain future, as they could be receiving less funding from NEA after President Donald Trump’s administration announced its 2019 budget proposal in February. For the second consecutive year, the administration’s budget proposal plans to decrease NEA funding by more than 80 percent, from \$150 million to \$29 million. The NEA’s 2017 funding represented .004 percent of the federal budget. Since the Sages and Seekers’ research grant is slated from May 2017 to August of this year, the nonprofit is in the clear for now, but its future could still be at risk. Organizations that solely or heavily rely on NEA money may be at risk when applying for funding in the next fiscal year.

“Conversation is the cornerstone of humanity,” Katz said. “If we’ve lost the art of conversation, then we’re going to be in big trouble.”

Like Riveros, Immordino-Yang noted how arts funding is crucial to education, and the arts should not be viewed merely as a luxury.

“People think of the arts as kind of a luxury that happens after you do your basic learning, but that’s not how the human mind works,” she said. “People need to have ways to express themselves and they need to engage with other people in meaningful ways.”

NEA funding will lead to research that allows Sages and Seekers to present quantifiable data on the impact of guided social conversations to other foundations when applying for future funding. The nonprofit is currently raising funds to cover expenses not included in the grant through online donations. The program hopes to spread across the country to various communities through high school or college curricula, Katz said.

“It’s really important especially in adolescents and in old age that people find a way to tell their own story in a way that pushes their life forward purposefully,” said Immordino-Yang, referring to the program’s purpose and the study’s goal in identifying those outcomes.

Riveros emphasized that the goal of art should not merely be aesthetic pleasure, but the promotion of positive human development translating into moral well-being. He said that while conversations are so intuitive and inexpensive, Sages and Seekers’ demonstrates how the power of conversation is critical to community involvement.

“We have to stop cutting funding for the arts when schools are struggling and find more resources to help people have instruction in various media that allow them to express themselves,” Immordino-Yang said. “This is every bit as important as learning math or learning to read.”