



“Senior Spaces: The Library Place for Baby Boomers, Older Adults & Their Families”

Allan M. Kleiman
Old Bridge, New Jersey (USA)

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ABSTRACT

The Old Bridge (NJ) Public Library has created an exciting and innovative approach to serving older adults by developing a little used space in the library and turning it into “Senior Spaces: The Library Place for Baby Boomers, Older Adults and Their Families.” Building upon the success of this new “space,” the Library continues to develop programs and services to meet the changing needs of multi-generations of older adults and their families. What has been unique in this metamorphosis of this project is the extensive community involvement, the early introduction of Web 2.0 technology components and gaming with the Wii. “Senior Spaces” has become a marketing “brand” recognized not only by our customers in Old Bridge, New Jersey but as a “model” program that is changing the way libraries view service to older adults. The author of this paper was the Project Director and designer of “Senior Spaces.”

Background:

The population all over the globe over aged sixty years is projected to grow substantially in the near future as the baby-boomer generation (those born between 1946 and 1964) ages. In 2000 there were 1, 443, 800 New Jerseyans aged 60 and over. By 2025, it is projected, that the population will number over 2.5 million in this age group. While the US national average is 13.5%, New Jersey already has over 17.2% of the population over 60, and it is expected to grow to 23.6% by 2025.

Public Libraries are ill equipped and experienced to deal with these changing demographics. Many libraries still view “seniors” with an ageist mindset, thinking of older adults as those folks residing in nursing homes or only interested in reading “large print.” The baby boomers beginning to retire are looking towards their libraries to

provide recreation, lifelong learning, civic engagement, ideas for second careers, and meaningful volunteer opportunities. But very few libraries in New Jersey had developed any specific programs for older adults and the baby boomers yet.

Based on these demographic trends and projections there was a strong need to develop a model program that could foster innovative and creative program ideas & services for older adults and the baby boomers that could be easily replicated.

Over the past few years, Libraries for the Future (LFF) has been a leading advocate for designated spaces within the library setting that can provide an anchor for a “new” type of library services for the baby boomers. But, while LFF focuses their efforts only towards the “active” well-educated baby boomer ready to soon retire, New Jersey’s demographics are quite different and needed a broader model; one which met the needs of multi-generations of seniors from 60 to 106.

And so, the Old Bridge Public Library building upon the work of LFF in Arizona and Connecticut began to conceptualize a “senior space” within our Library. Not only would it be for the baby boomers, but it would also meet the needs of older adults, the elderly and their families, too!

“Senior Spaces” is Born!

The initial idea for “senior spaces” was defined by the Old Bridge Public Library’s Board of Trustees as part of their process in developing a Strategic Plan for the library’s future. In it, the Library Board identified seniors and baby boomers as the “new mass audience,” and challenged the Library staff to “think outside the box” in terms of how to differently serve this population. Part of the conversation was to find an innovative ways to bring programs and services together in the Library under a new “umbrella.”

Like the LFF models, the Old Bridge Public Library staff felt that a physical “space” for this project within the library was an essential component and would give older adults an anchor within the Library. The Library’s open space architecture and design gave it a unique “edge” for this project. The building is divided in seven sections or “bays,” each one with an individual theme or service component in place. They included: Children’s, Teens, Adult & Information Services, Audio Visual, Science Fiction and “Reading/Lounge areas. The proposal was to turn the little used Science Fiction area into “Senior Spaces.” This “open” design meant that there would be little or no construction costs to create the “space;” something that could be attractive to other Libraries as they replicated the model. The Library would also consolidate and relocate the Electronic Resources Department to create a “classroom” for computer training and small group programming adjacent to the “space.”

Taking Shape

Phase I of the project took place from January-June 2007, and concentrated on the physical components of “Senior Spaces.” This included design of the space, purchasing appropriate furniture (both for the floor area and the “Senior Spaces” Classroom),

purchasing books/materials, shifting library books/materials, signage and developing a “Senior Spaces” Advisory Board.

Unlike other projects in which only a small number of staff is involved, we felt that the long term success of the project depended on buy-in from as many of the staff as possible. The entire Adult & Information Services Department staff was involved with the growth, development and programming activities of “Senior Spaces” with Assistant Director Allan M. Kleiman serving as the overall designer and Project Director. Staff was briefed weekly on the progress of the project.

“Senior Spaces: The Library Place for Baby Boomers, Older Adults and Their Families,” was dedicated on June 8, 2007 and received rave reviews from Librarians across New Jersey. None of the furniture was custom designed but rather purchased right out of the box from library suppliers. Since the budget was limited, the design was a mix of new and old; red and blue. Once again, this made the project more affordable for small libraries without additional funding to create their own “senior” space.

The website (www.infolink.org/seniorspaces) and the blog at: <http://www.seniorspaces.blogspot.com> were launched on that day allowing libraries around the world to read about and view the progress of the project. Noted lifelong advocate for service to older adults, Dr. Betty Turock, Professor Emeritus, Rutgers University delivered the keynote address at the opening.

When you visit the area, it was designed using the concept of “spaces within spaces” or activity areas. These are places where customers can be actively engaged in self-learning and discovery. Universal design and making the space accessible played an important role in the overall design plan as well. Thought was given to ensure that there were wheelchair height tables, large screen computer monitors, bulletin boards at wheelchair height, large print keyboards, “talking books,” a closed-circuit enlarger and a receiver from the “Radio Reading Service” in New Jersey.

Placing “Senior Spaces” adjacent to the Library’s extensive large print book collection further extended the “spaces” for our visually impaired customers. Customers can listen to a Book-on-CD, a DVD or a music CD anytime they choose at one of our two “learning” workstations. In addition, the redesigned library space provides a variety of seating options for customers of all ages; everything from rocking chairs to hard back seating, to comfortable “plush” chairs that you might find in your own living room.

But the centerpiece of this “space” has to be the merchandised “bookstore” where seniors can browse for a magazine to read in the Library, a book to take-home, or even a DVDs of interest. Rather than arrange the area in a “Dewey-like” format, we choose merchandised shelving that allows customers to “explore” topics like: “Your Family & Friends,” “You’re Still Learning,” “Your Health,” “You Remember When,” and “Your Retirement.”

Programming

Prior to the development of “Senior Spaces,” the physical space was “claimed” by several groups that used it on a regular basis. In our overall plans we felt that we would welcome these groups to be potential partners in this new project. These included the Monday card players, the Tuesday Mah Jong players, and the Thursday crafters. Our most active “library club” was the Savvy Seniors who use the library as their base for programs, social activities and volunteering.

In October 2006 we also recognized the need to get a portion of the Strategic Plan underway until we could find funding for “senior spaces.” We began “Senior Fridays;” a weekly program for adults and older adults. These “Senior Fridays” became and continue to be the core of our programming efforts and draw our largest audiences. Programs are developed to appeal to a wide audience, to both men and women, provide learning as well as recreational opportunities.

Although the physical component of the project is essential for a focal point in the Library, it is the programming aspect of the project that is the most attractive to baby boomers and older adults. It is more than just the “icing the cake.” Rather, we have taken the point-of-view that programming makes “Senior Spaces” come alive! Could you imagine a Children’s Room anywhere in the world where stories are not shared, learning is not cultivated, curiosity not developed and exploration not encouraged? Neither could we!

Getting Seniors & Boomers Involved

One of the key reasons for success of our programming effort has been by working with the community through our Advisory Board. This group of 10 men and women meet monthly with the staff and provide feedback and guidance to the Library on the project. They have encouraged us to reach out to community groups, to provide book collections in senior residences, and have assisted in program promotion and marketing. A new series of “travel” programs co-sponsored by the Library has been developed by one of our Advisory Board members. Our next phase is to expand membership on the Advisory Board to service providers in the community and county in an effort to expand our links and provide better outreach programming.

Feedback from program participants is always encouraged and several surveys were done to determine future programming. One of the issues raised was that the Library should provide more opportunities for seniors and baby boomers to get together to “talk.” Once a month, “Senior Fridays” programming includes an opportunity to “talk,” and “exchange,” and the Library just recently developed a monthly film and discussion series and a Woman’s Discussion Group.

Technology & Web 2.0

Prior to “Senior Spaces” the Library already had in place the opportunity for adults and older adults to take computer classes. Courses like Internet Basics, Microsoft Word, or PC Basics were offered each month. But what was the next step? Courses have now

been developed on digital cameras, blogging, podcasting, and Second Life. But what we never planned on was gaming with the Wii!

The library had been doing some gaming programming with our Teens on an irregular basis. In 2006, the Wii was introduced in the United States and video gaming history was made. By mid-2007 gaming with seniors in nursing homes and senior centers was taking off with videos on You Tube and an article about it in The New York Times. But few libraries had taken up the challenge. But we were challenged by Jenny Levine of the American Library Association to put gaming and older adults to the test. Would it succeed? Or be a failure? We purchased our first Wii in October 2007 and had sessions scheduled for November and December 2007 utilizing our teens as trainers for our seniors. We had no idea what to expect. It proved to be a success beyond our wildest dreams!

Gaming has given the seniors an opportunity “feel more like the teens, actively engaged and participating in current technology. Several of the seniors have been encouraged to attend these gaming sessions by their children and grandchildren. Each open gaming session attracts 10-15 in attendance. Some have now become expert; others are still learning. There is a camaraderie that has developed, too! There is a social aspect that makes the sessions more enjoyable than simply competitive. Everyone wants everyone else to succeed! The #1 favorite game is Wii Bowling since there is little to learn and one can enjoy playing the “game” with very little technical support. Each session also include another type of game for the group to try, such as Brain Age Academy and Super Mario Kart. Some of the seniors have even tried Guitar Hero III and American Idol. We project the games on a large screen which has allowed several of our visually impaired seniors to participate in the gaming activities as well.

The Future

The Old Bridge Public Library was committed to ensure that the project was institutionalized after grant funding was expended in June 2008 and that monies allocated for it in its regular budget. “Senior Spaces continues to grow, expand and develop.

Late in 2007, a part-time Senior Spaces Librarian was hired as part of the Adult & Information Services Department to ensure continuity. She has been working with the Project Director and the Advisory Board to develop future direction. Funding for book and materials have been allocated from the Library’s regular budget and funding for programming allocated from monies donated by the Friends of the Library.

Furniture has been re-distributed in the “space” to ensure better merchandising and traffic patterns. Additional magazines have been purchased for in-library use and an additional television video/DVD player had to be added due to constant use. The “classroom” now boasts a “smart electronic board,” digital cameras and a digital camcorder for our customer to use in the Library. Technology training is to take a different turn in the future as we work with seniors on life review using “blogging” and genealogy using the digital camera and camcorder. Development of specific

programming for boomers on a regular basis is a priority as well as introducing additional opportunities for volunteerism and civic engagement. Development of ‘senior spaces’ in Second Life is in the planning stage.

Conclusion

The Old Bridge (NJ) Public Library has developed a model program for library service to older adults, called “Senior Spaces.” While “senior spaces” are not yet the “norm,” changing demographics around the globe warrant such a shift in public libraries. With the “graying of the population” baby boomers and older adults need to feel welcome in the library with a place they can call their own; and “senior spaces” does that. Developing your own “senior spaces” is not just a challenge but an opportunity whose time has come!