Men’s Sheds: An Outlet for Engaging in Creative Activities

“In society, older adults are sometimes a forgotten group. But they have so much creativity to share and need an outlet for it.”

ABSTRACT
This research highlights the purpose behind creating an art exhibition featuring work made by Men’s Shed members, many of whom are older adults. Publicly displaying their creative works demonstrates the creative capacities of these older men and counteracts the negative narrative that older adulthood is a time when individuals experience declining abilities. The exhibition also inspires older adults to consider what they can create, experiment with learning new mediums, and provides opportunities to connect with others who may share similar interests.

Keywords
Exhibition, Men’s Sheds, Older Adults

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Men’s Sheds

Men’s Sheds originated in Australia during the 1990’s and have since grown all over the world (Foley & Golding, 2021). The Men’s Shed Movement was started by Australia’s health board to address significant levels of social isolation they noted among men due to retirement, unemployment, illness, or disability (Men’s Sheds CYMRU, 2023). Men’s Sheds now appear in Canada, Denmark, Ireland, Kenya, New Zealand, U.K., U.S., and South Africa (Australian Men’s Shed Association, 2023). At present, Ireland has the most Men’s Sheds per capita with approximately 450 dispersed throughout the country (Irish Men’s Shed Association, 2019). Both rural and urban areas contain Men’s Sheds and they are not limited to any specific geographic region (Irish Men’s Sheds Association, 2019).

Although Men’s Sheds may look different depending on the country they reside, in Ireland, Men’s Sheds are generally places were only men attend (Golding, 2021a). The Men’s Shed Movement was designed to provide a safe space for men to meet informally to talk with one another and engage in hands-on activities such as woodcraft, gardening, painting, or any other activities that the men have decided to participate in (Golding, 2021b). Men talk better shoulder to shoulder rather than face-to-face and while participating in the activities mentioned above, men may also open to one another, share concerns, and gain support from one another (Golding, 2021b). Relatedly, men may feel more comfortable disclosing health related fears with other men as compared to women (McGrath et al., 2022).

Some Sheds in other countries like Australia also include women as members and are sometimes referred to as Community Sheds rather than Men’s Sheds (Golding, 2021b). More recently, Women’s Sheds have also started to appear in Australia, Ireland, and the U.K. (Golding & Carragher, 2021). Similarly, Women’s Sheds also feature hands-on activities, often featuring crafts for members to participate in (Golding & Carragher, 2021).

Attendees of Men’s Sheds are often retired older men, but membership is open to all adults (Golding, 2015). Older men report that they enjoy how Men’s Sheds help them connect with others (Nurmi et al., 2018) and like offering advice to other members based on experiences that they have lived through (Cox et al., 2019). Men’s Sheds create environments where men feel welcome and as though they are still capable of contributing something valuable to society (Ormsby et al., 2010). This is particularly important as feelings of worth and purpose may decline among men during retirement (Anstiss et al., 2018). In addition, Men’s Sheds have the potential to reduce rates of loneliness and isolation that can plague older men, and instead create spaces that facilitate social connections and friendships (Nurmi et al., 2018).

Background

I learned about the art made at Irish Men’s Sheds when I interviewed older members to understand more about how Men’s Sheds add purpose and meaning to the lives. While visiting the sheds, many of the men showed me the art that they had made and were eager to explain the creative activities they were engaged in (Figure 1). Woodcraft was the creative medium of choice among many of the men. Some Men’s Sheds brought in skilled artists to them techniques

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whereas other Men’s Shed members learned from other members of the shed or taught themselves.

**Figure 1**
A Men’s Shed member holds up an owl clock made at the Mulcair Men’s Shed in County Limerick

I was fascinated by the level of skill and craftsmanship on display at the Men’s Sheds and after returning to the U.S., I talked with several colleagues who are also practicing artists about what I had seen at the Men’s Sheds. They suggested creating a public exhibition for others to appreciate the art and learn more about Men’s Sheds.

**Inspiration**

I applied for and received a Fulbright Alumni grant to help support the exhibition. In the spring of 2023 in partnership with the Irish Men’s Shed Association, Men’s Sheds in counties Clare, Limerick, and Tipperary were contacted about an opportunity to submit art that they created at their Men’s Sheds to appear in an exhibition at the Limerick School of Art and Design - TUS in Limerick City, Ireland.

The purpose of the project was to create an event where the public could see how creative the Men’s Shed members were (many of whom were older adults), and to experience the level of craftsmanship that older adults possessed and to understand that they are still creative and learning new skills. Counteracting aging stereotypes is important given their prevalence and that they have become increasingly negative over time (Ng et al., 2015). Interestingly, Weiss et al. (2013) demonstrated that older adults can self-differentiate themselves from negative aging stereotypes and as a result, are less affected by them. Relatedly, when older adults have opportunities to create more positive self-images through creative outlets, feelings of

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empowerment may arise (Sabeti, 2015). I hoped that creating an exhibition demonstrating the creativity of Men’s Shed members might be a way to highlight what older adults are still capable of and reduce negative stereotypes.

Process

When submitting their art for the exhibition, Irish Men’s Sheds members included an image and brief paragraph discussing their piece and how it was made. The submissions were anonymized and then the images and descriptions of the art were assembled for reviewers. Two artists from the United States and one from Ireland reviewed the submissions and gave their recommendations for which items to select for the exhibition as well as first, second, and third place awards.

Men’s Shed Exhibition

In May 2023, the exhibition was set up at the Limerick School of Art and Design - TUS. The building that the exhibition was in was ideal as it had large windows that allowed the artwork to be visible to the public passing by. Each art piece had a corresponding description card in front of it that allowed individuals to learn more about the artists and their pieces (Figure 2). In addition to the public coming to view the art on display, students attending the Limerick School of Art and Design – TUS were able to see the work in the building where they took classes and had their own studio spaces. I spoke with several students who explained that they had “No idea this went on at Men’s Sheds” or that “These men were capable of making this!”

Figure 2
A view from the large windows that allowed the public to look in from the street and see the art.
Creating Connections around Art

The exhibition helped to facilitate connection in several interesting ways. First, it helped to build stronger connections among Men’s Shed members. One Ukrainian war refugee was living in Ireland and housed near a Men’s Shed and became acquainted with a fellow Men’s Shed member. He began visiting the Men’s Shed regularly and sculpting his experiences from war. His sculpture of Ukrainian war refugees (Figure 3) won first place at the exhibition and during the opening reception, he was able to talk with the public about his inspiration for the sculpture and explain what it is like living as a refugee in Ireland.

Figure 3
A sculpture depicting Ukrainian war refugees.

Individuals who attended the opening reception of the exhibition were mostly men. Men are less likely to attend artistic events compared to women (Falk & Katz-Gerro, 2016), and creating an exhibition based on work created by men seemed to increase the number of men who attended the event. Men also tend to have more difficulty with social relationships, especially in older adulthood and are at greater risk for loneliness and social isolation (Barreto et al., 2021; Crabtree et al., 2018). However, connecting with others can help to offset some of these mental health challenges. Discussing how to create the art and inspiration for it helps to facilitate conversations and connections among men, which may be particularly protective to them in older adulthood (Figure 4).
Figure 4
Two Men’s Sheds members discuss the art at the exhibition.

Reflections
In society, older adults are sometimes a forgotten group. But they have so much creativity to share and need an outlet for it. Additional environments are needed to encourage and display their creative works (Lee et al., 2023). Not only would it demonstrate how capable older adults are, but it might inspire other older adults to search for their own creativity, try something new, or learn a new artistic medium. As one example, a 77-year-old Men’s Shed member learned how to carve during retirement and demonstrated his resourcefulness with his submission of a bird (Figure 5). He explained that the bird was “Made from a piece of Mahogany taken from a broken chest of drawers and mounted on a piece of Bog Oak.” Overall, the exhibition was a reminder of the creative capacity older adults possess and events like these challenge deficit models of aging which focus on loss and decline (Mitnitski & Rockwood, 2015). Concentrating on loss and decline may perpetuate aging stereotypes. However, creating additional events and opportunities like this exhibition may help to counteract negative perspectives of older adulthood.
Figure 5
Bird carved out of pieces of a broken chest and mounted on Bog Oak

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Images by Melinda Heinz and Paul Tarpey, Lecturer, Limerick School of Art and Design - TUS 2023

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