a program to bridge aging and artists’ minds

“Grow old with me! The best is yet to be...” - Robert Browning

The Inspiration

In the summer of 2014, Founder Alison Hirsch’s passion for literature and interest in the socioemotional well-being of the aging inspired her to create The Tea and Poetry Program: a monthly, year-round gathering with patients of the Irving Sherwood Wright Center on Aging, Weill Cornell Medical Center’s division for geriatrics.¹

¹ The Irving Sherwood Wright Center On Aging outpatient clinic for the NewYork-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell Medical Center’s Division of Geriatrics and Palliative Medicine.
Alison’s Mission

“The impetus for this program is my sensitivity to the loneliness and disconnect the elderly experience. While many of my peers have been unable to empathize with or overcome the age barrier to connect with aging persons, I have always gravitated towards them. As an avid reader and writer, I’m passionate about storytelling and the power of the written word, and feel that poetry, both magical and timeless, brings people together. Through poetry, collegiality, and stimulating conversations within The Tea and Poetry Program, our group is able to form wonderful bonds and transcend age and malady.”

– Alison Hirsch

References:

Intergenerational socialization in chronic geriatric populations has been shown to reduce daytime sleepiness, increase mobility, decrease voluntary confinement and increase social interaction. Additionally, research has shown that the influence of social relationships in the geriatric population on risk for mortality is comparable to well-established risk factors for mortality. Additionally, short stories, poems and drawings that allow reminiscence and discussion of memories may help resolve past conflicts, improve life balance and combat depression.

2 Howard F. Wallach , MD et al, Psychosocial Rehabilitation for Chronic Geriatric Patients: An Intergenerational Approach. The Gerontological Society of America 1979


The Program:

Tea & Poetry is a class where Alison leads a group from the Irving Wright Center in the reading and discussion of poems marked by different poets, eras, styles, and themes.

Sessions are held one Tuesday afternoon, from 4 to 5pm, each month. Teas and cookies are savored, along with stimulating conversation that connects and invigorates people of all ages.

Each session, Alison presents three to five poems. Alison introduces each poem by providing the respective poets’ background and any relevant historical context. After reading the poem, Alison provides a brief analysis of the work before opening the poem for discussion. Alison entertains questions and invites participants to share any memories and personal stories prompted by the poem.
Many participants meet for the first time at these sessions. Before departing from the class, participants are often heard making plans to see one another and sharing excitement towards the next session. Every third session, Alison solicits participants’ comments, critiques, and requests for poems for upcoming meetings.

Sample Poems:

“A Dream Within a Dream”  
by Edgar Allan Poe

“O Captain! My Captain”  
by Walt Whitman

“Trees”  
by Joyce Kilmer

“Abou Ben Adhem”  
by Leigh Hunt

“Fire and Ice”  
by Robert Frost

“Islands”  
by Muriel Rukeyser

The first Tea & Poetry!  
Division of Geriatrics and Palliative Medicine  
Co-Chief, Dr. Mark S. Lachs  
with Irving Sherwood Wright Center on Aging.
At the end of each session, Alison offers lead-off statements to encourage attendees to write reflections and participant feedback from previous sessions.

“I enjoy the friendliness and intellectualism and warmth.”

“I enjoy Alison’s explanation and passion of the different poetry styles.”

“It’s great because we all think differently about the same lines. We can discuss and disagree…and still leave with smiles on our faces.”
“I really like that we know each other because of this class.”

“I enjoy the discussions.”

“She teaches us new ideas from her generation and we share what we’ve experienced from our lives.”
"I enjoy Ali’s choice of poems and the background information she provides”
— Alma Flesch

“I enjoy the entire session... I enjoy everything about the program.”

“I enjoy the knowledge of the group and Ali!”

"The warm poetic feelings are so very moving..."
Founder’s Bio:

Alison Hirsch is a sophomore at The Trinity School in New York City. She is the film critic and “Life” section editor for Trinity’s newspaper, the Trinity Times. Additionally, she is an editor for Trinity’s literary Magazine, Columbus. Her passion for stories and storytelling has led her to take literature and creative writing classes at Columbia University, The Ross School, and Symphony Space. Her stories have been published by Teen Ink and are available on her literary website:

www.alison-hirsch.com

As an avid reader and writer, Alison uses storytelling to transcend age barriers, connecting and invigorating people of all ages. Consistent with her literary pursuits, she has taken acting workshops at the New York Film Academy, The Lee Strasberg Theater and Film Institute, the Atlantic Theater Company, and the Applause Acting & Film Series. Alison has also taken public speaking and speech-writing classes to further her interest in bringing the written word to life. Most recently, Alison founded the Trinity Film Club and became a certified leader of the One Love Foundation, working across the country to raise awareness about domestic violence.