

In 90-degree heat, Stamford seniors transformed Cove Island bridge. Now it's 'blooming' with painted waterlilies.

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Stamford Senior Center member Ann Mayer paints the mural at Cove Island Park with children from the Pathfinders Adventure Camp, who joined the two-week initiative. / Contributed by the Stamford Senior Center

STAMFORD — The mural painted at the entrance to Cove Island Park is the product of a series of happy accidents: a walk with a friend; a call to the Stamford Senior Center; a new employee.

But after two weeks of painting and dozens upon dozens of visitors to the new waterlily mural on the bridge that leads into Cove Island Park, the public artwork is also a testament to what older adults can accomplish together.

Dozens of citizen artists wearing white “I Painted The Cove Island Bridge” t-shirts celebrated in the shade earlier this week as the Stamford Senior Center and city officials put their work on display for the community to see.

“Our society does not value our senior community and often just sees them as a drain on our society, on our financial system, on our health care system,” Stamford Senior Center Director Christina Crain said. “But I hope this project shines a light to younger generations that seniors are a valuable asset.”

Crain worked with the Greenwich-based motivational speaker Laurie Newkirk to help put together the mural project. Newkirk and her co-creator James Gerelli stumbled upon the old bridge on a stroll through Cove Island. Newkirk thought: “This park is so beautiful, but this bridge is so ugly.”

Almost immediately, she called the senior center and pitched to Crain the idea of seniors painting a mural at Cove Island Park as a community activity. Only days before receiving that call, Crain had hired the Stamford Senior Center’s first art director, Rene Soto.

For Soto, who volunteered with the senior center for more than six years before formally joining the team, the new mural is a victory lap. After two years of a raging pandemic, he designed the waterlily mural now on the bridge to mark the beginning of a new era.



Members of the Stamford Senior Center painted the new waterlily mural at Cove Island Park. But what started as a senior center event quickly became a community-wide project. / Contributed by the Stamford Senior Center



Stamford Senior Center member Florida Gonzalez, 74, helps paint the new waterlily mural at Cove Island Park.



Stamford Senior Center member Hilda Woodson, 92, helps paint the new waterlily mural at Cove Island Park.

“We had all these dark times during the pandemic, and now we’re blooming,” Soto said.

Even though the 40-plus senior center members who worked on the mural took center stage during the celebration Tuesday, they weren’t alone in their efforts. Children from the Pathfinders Adventure summer day camp joined the senior center for one day of painting. Passersby picked up brushes during trips to the park and made their own marks.

“It’s a community thing,” senior center member Ann Meyer said. During their painting sessions, the seniors danced to music and relished the sunshine. After COVID, it was a welcome experience.

Meyer also pointed to the mural as an example of how many resources exist for seniors. In her youth, that was far from the case.

“I’m a lifelong Stamfordite,” she explained. “Years ago, you didn’t see activities for seniors. They would sit around and sing old songs. Now, we’re exercising and doing things.”

Francisca Widyono, another senior center member and one of Meyer’s friends, chimed in immediately. She sees a night-and-day difference between the life she can have as a senior in Stamford and the life she would have had in her native Indonesia.

“At 50 there, you’re done,” she said. But in Stamford — and thanks to the senior center — her friends have full social calendars. The mural painting is just one example of that.

“To see all the seniors coming out? That’s the best,” Meyer said.



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