



**WASHINGTON
PERFORMING ARTS**

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Washington Performing Arts and George Washington University Forge Pioneering Partnership to Launch “The NeuroArts Collective”

*The collaboration merges performing arts and
public health to enhance wellbeing in senior communities*

WASHINGTON (January 12, 2026) — Washington Performing Arts and the George Washington University’s Milken Institute School of Public Health today announced the launch of *The NeuroArts Collective*, a groundbreaking partnership bringing together the performing arts and public health to advance brain health and social well-being among older adults.

This collaboration introduces graduate practicum experiences in NeuroArts, an emerging field exploring how artistic engagement can enhance neurological and cognitive health, bridging science, creativity, and compassionate care.

“Through *The NeuroArts Collective*, we’re connecting the power of the arts with the rigor of public health practice,” said Jenny Bilfield, President and CEO of Washington Performing Arts. “Our shared goal is to build healthier, more connected aging communities by harnessing music, dance, and creativity as catalysts for wellness.”

Leading the public health component of the collaboration is Sydnae Law, Director of Applied Practice at GW’s Milken Institute School of Public Health. “This partnership exemplifies what’s possible when we break down silos between disciplines,” Law said. “By bringing public health students into arts-based community settings, we’re building evidence-based programs that address cognitive decline, isolation, and quality of life for older adults.”

The initiative’s inaugural practicum students, Ciel Vidale and Neneh Sheriff—both Master of Public Health candidates at GW—are working in close collaboration with Washington Performing Arts’ Director of Arts Education & Partnerships Amber Pannocchia; Community and

Global Programs Manager Hannah Katz; and faculty and staff at Ingleside at Rock Creek, a leading retirement and assisted living community in Washington, D.C.

Their work examines how music, movement, and dance affect individuals living with Parkinson's disease, dementia, or Alzheimer's disease. In partnership with Washington Performing Arts teaching artists, Vidale and Sheriff are translating their research into practice by helping to shape and strengthen arts-based programming for older adults.

In collaboration with Ingleside at Rock Creek, they are:

- Conducting a comprehensive literature review of current NeuroArts research.
- Developing accessible educational materials for residents, caregivers, and staff.
- Facilitating focus group discussions to inform the design of future programs.
- Piloting and evaluating new arts-based wellness programs launching in Spring 2026.

"Working with Washington Performing Arts and Ingleside has fundamentally shaped how I understand public health in practice," said Ciel Vidale, MPH candidate at George Washington University. "Parkinson's disease affects far more than motor function, it impacts confidence, identity, and social connection. Through movement and dance, I witnessed residents reclaim a sense of agency and joy in ways that traditional health interventions often struggle to reach."

Vidale reflected on a moment that crystallized the power of arts-based health promotion during a focus group demonstration led alongside Washington Performing Arts teaching artist Lucy Bowen McCauley. "Lucy shared a phrase that stayed with me throughout this work: '*the can'ts turn into can's.*' During the session, you could physically see that shift happening. Participants who initially hesitated became more animated, more confident, and visibly happier as the movement progressed. Their posture changed, their faces lit up, and they were eager for the next sequence. It was remarkable to witness."

She added that the impact extended beyond movement alone. "What stood out most was how quickly people stepped out of their shells. The room transformed into a space of fellowship and community: participants laughing, encouraging one another, and fully present. Parkinson's disease can be profoundly isolating, so seeing people smile, laugh, and genuinely enjoy themselves underscored what this work is really about."

One moment in particular left a lasting impression. "After the demonstration, one resident shared, '*My wife would be so surprised to see me doing this.*' He had assumed he would not be able to participate much, yet he not only engaged, he impressed himself. That moment was incredibly heartwarming and reinforced the idea that when programs are designed with dignity and inclusion at the center, people often discover strengths they didn't realize they still had."

Vidale's practicum focuses on the role of dance and movement in improving motor function and emotional well-being among residents with Parkinson's disease, while Sheriff's project is centered on the use of music to support cognitive function in the Memory Support Assisted Living (MSAL) group.

"Working alongside Washington Performing Arts and Ingleside Senior Living Facility has deeply shaped my understanding of how public health can be experienced beyond traditional clinical settings," said Sheriff. "Alzheimer's disease and dementia affect far more than memory. They impact identity, emotional well-being, and a person's sense of connection to others. Through music and based on research, there is an improvement in residents' access to moments of joy, familiarity, and presence that are often difficult to reach through standard health interventions alone."

Sheriff reflected on how research and observation informed the development of an educational music program designed specifically for individuals living with memory loss. "The literature consistently shows that music activates preserved parts of the brain, even as other cognitive functions decline. During sample sessions, it was powerful to see residents who were initially quiet begin humming, tapping along, or softly singing as familiar melodies played. These small responses carried deep meaning."

"The NeuroArts Collective reflects our shared belief that the arts are not a luxury, they are a vital component of public health," said Bilfield. "Together, we're shaping the future of community care through creativity, science, and empathy."

Law added, "We're thrilled to see this initiative come to life through the work of Ciel and Neneh, and to continue building evidence for the power of the arts to heal, engage, and transform lives."

Learn more about the collaboration in this [video](#).

About Washington Performing Arts

One of the most established and honored performing arts institutions in America, Washington Performing Arts has engaged for 60 years with artists, audiences, students, and civic life. The city is truly our stage with events in myriad performance venues, neighborhoods, and online. Washington Performing Arts presents a range of artists and art forms, from the most distinguished symphony orchestras to both renowned and emerging artists in classical, gospel music, jazz, culturally specific genres, dance, and more. Additionally, the organization's gospel music programs have fostered community, and nurtured aspiring and experienced vocalists in the capital region since 1993.

Washington Performing Arts deeply values its partnerships with local organizations and other arts institutions, and places a premium on establishing artists as a continuing presence in the lives

of both young people and adults through residencies, education and community programs. Its signature community engagement initiative, Mars Arts DC, spotlights the dynamic vibrancy of local artists across all eight wards of the District. Since 2020, Washington Performing Arts has expanded its online artistic and educational presence, developing opportunities for further connection and community.

Washington Performing Arts's impact and achievements have been recognized with a 2012 with the National Medal of Arts, and with four Mayor's Arts Awards from the DC Government. Washington Performing Arts now embarks on its second half-century, ever inspired by the motto of founder Patrick Hayes, "Everybody in, nobody out."

For more information about Washington Performing Arts, visit
www.washingtonperformingarts.org.