Skype-A-Docent @ the Fairfield Public Library

Fairfield Public Library's Skype-a-Docent is a Programs for Older Adults LSTA project that entails virtual presentations by museums and art galleries to congregate housing facilities and also at the library for the community's mobile seniors.

Each month a different museum presents four tours of its artwork and collections along with a Q&A session with a museum docent; these tours last about an hour and explain the significance of various pieces on display.

Using an iPad and the internet, docents Skype a broadcast of the tour back to Fairfield.

Project Coordinator Lauren DeNisco's approach builds on the best practices found in Madlyn Schneider's (Queens Library) Book Club for the Homebound that meets via the free online platform Skype. Schneider's effort was awarded The New York Times ‘I Love My Librarian’ prize in December, 2012.

(L) This photo gives viewers a sense of how Skype-A-Docent looks on the receiving end

Presentations completed so far by the Bruce Museum and the New Britain Museum of American Art have met with resounding success in both numbers of attendees and in outcome-based evaluation measurements of knowledge gain.

In all, Skype-A-Docent will see nine different museums presenting a total of 36 programs for older adults. Future programs will see the library partnering with the Bellarmine Museum (December, 2013), the Fairfield Museum and History Center (January, 2014), the Mattatuck Museum (February, 2014), the Housatonic Museum of Art (March, 2014), the Beardsley Zoo (April, 2014), and the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum (May, 2014).

Housing facility partners include the Fairview Healthcare Center of Fairfield (120 residents), the Ludlowe Center for Health and Rehabilitation (144 residents), and Parish Court (100 residents). Also partnering is the Fairfield Senior Center in the heart of town where over 500 different residents participate in programs each month.
Spurring the project was DeNisco's recognition of the differentiated needs of Fairfield's mobile older adults from those living in "...congregate housing who have very limited access to the community outside their housing. Many don't drive, some have disabilities, and others are in rehabilitation. For all of them, public transportation is quite limited, even nonexistent."

(L) Lauren DeNisco of the Fairfield Public Library is Project Director of *Skype-A-Docent.*

After meeting with the Recreation Directors at each of the four partnering housing sites, DeNisco spoke to residents to determine their needs. She also polled users of the Senior Center; answers from both groups proved revealing.

Mobile seniors generally responded that while getting out was not a problem, driving long distances to unfamiliar destinations was intimidating. While intrigued by the idea of going to a museum, most said that they would only do so in a group as a social adventure. Even the most active among this population admitted that an hours-long tour of walking and standing would be tiring. One comment agreed upon by all was that "...touring a museum with a leader who could lecture on the art would be better than looking at a piece for 10 seconds before moving on."

Since many of these seniors are already banded together in friendships and participate in other lifelong learning programs at the senior center, it was natural to put the two together.

While the library offers a robust museum pass program to 41 different institutions, DeNisco realized that senior populations cannot easily participate. "Many of these folks," she said, "are either unable to drive themselves or are leery about driving any distance to go to a museum. They may be unable to walk around once they are there or may have difficulty seeing on a group tour."

Residential seniors, on the other hand, proved to be quite passive. DeNisco found that this group that lets staff arrange most outings, believe that all costs involved are included in their residential fees, aren't knowledgeable about the budget limitations that recreation directors face. Most responded that in-person tours to museums would be impractical and difficult, especially for those in wheelchairs. *Skype-a-Docent* brings a piece of the outside world to the doorsteps of these individuals with dignity and stimulation.

So DeNisco developed *Skype-A-Docent* to amplify activities that the library already does for its older adult patrons in deeper service to an important and vital portion of the patron base. For
example, the library offers librarian-led book discussions at the Senior Center, provides homebound services of print materials and audiobooks, CDs, magazines and movies to individuals in private homes and in 7 facilities in town, and in 2012 convinced the Senior Bus to make the library a weekly stop.

After purchasing the project's equipment and peripherals, DeNisco worked with museums to arrange for docents to make Skype presentations. She also talked up the project with partners at the housing facilities and at the Senior Center, and she or a volunteer transports computer devices back and forth to the partner sites. DeNisco has also purchased books and videos as supplements for the program's lecture component, coordinating delivery and collection of these items as well.

The First Selectman, Library Director Karen Ronald, and the Library Board of Trustees support the project and it is advertised in the local press, and on the WICC-AM Community Calendar and the town's online calendar.

![Image](image_url)

(L) This stand allows the iPad to be held steady and transported smoothly. Its solid, heavy base is wheeled.

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