

# YOUTH ENGAGING SENIORS (YES)

Growth and Development Services, Inc (GDS)

**Contact:**

Dr. Gary Altheim  
Executive Director/Director of Programs  
drgaryaltheim@excelgds.org

Lenishemarie Lopez  
Creative Development Lead  
llopez@excelgds.org

[www.excelgds.org](http://www.excelgds.org)



ExcelGDS



## Overview:

For more than 25 years, Growth and Development Services, Inc. (GDS) empowers youth in Upper Manhattan to beat the odds and create bright, self-sufficient futures. Through youth development, mental health, advocacy, and training programs, GDS has proven success in transforming the lives of inner-city youth. GDS provides participants with the skills, support, confidence, and motivation they need to succeed in school/college, their communities, and the workforce. GDS' most recent initiative is Youth Engaging Seniors.

**“ You all brighten their day;  
they could not wait  
to sing and dance with you. ”**

**--Cinthy Castillo, Group Leader  
Riverstone Memory center**

Youth Engaging Seniors (YES) is a transformational intergenerational music program. YES has proven successful in awakening the joyful memories of seniors while simultaneously expanding the neighborhood youth. Using life soundtracks, life story work, and human connection, we help elders with dementia unlock and relive joyful moments in their lives. The youth spend quality time with the seniors suffering from dementia. They work as a group, engaging seniors with music and dancing.

YES' philosophy and design are based on a holistic approach and intensive training of youth volunteers by licensed mental health professionals. Each youth volunteer is first trained to be an Intergenerational Wellness Facilitator (IWF). This training uses GDS's proven, successful Reach Your Potential (RYP) Model. We educate IWFs' on dementia and elder care in our community. All youth participants and volunteers receive training from a Psychologist on how to most effectively interact with elders with dementia.



## Benefits of music:

Music is emotionally and behaviorally beneficial for elders with Alzheimer's, researchers have found that music can reduce stress, anxiety, depression and agitation. It can also help improve focus; in addition, music can help elders connect with others and with fond memories.

According to research published by alzheimers.net, music evokes emotions that brings memories, musical aptitude and music appreciation are two of the last remaining abilities in patients with Alzheimer's, music can bring emotional and physical closeness, singing activates the left side of the brain and listening to music sparks activity in the right side. With so much of the brain being stimulated, the elders can exercise more mind power than usual. Music can shift mood, manage stress and stimulate positive interactions. It can also affect caregivers positively, by engaging with the elder and reducing stress and periods of agitation and confrontation.



## Youth Engaging Seniors

GDS will partner with your Community Based Organization and with a local High School. The youth and volunteers are first trained to become Intergenerational Wellness Facilitators (IWF); where they are trained on how to make connections with elders, how to be empathetic toward each other and seniors, and how to use music to connect with elders with dementia and help them tell their life stories. The youth are also given a set of skills that will help them become advocates for their community and themselves; then, they join the seniors.

In the first few sessions of the program, the youth and elders bond and connect in a group, using weekly music and dancing sessions led by a psychologist and a bilingual program coordinator. Each youth is then partnered with an elder to create soundtracks of the elder's life. Youth and elders listen to these soundtracks, reminiscing and sharing stories about each other.

YES has proven to be transformational for everyone involved, helping youth expand their empathy, become peer leaders and connect with their community, and helping elders end loneliness and provides them with a therapeutic music session, in which they can relive different moments of their lives.

**“This program changes my outlook and gives me hope for this community at a time when I was ready to give up. Thanks, Dr. Gary, and your whole team.”**

**--Deborah, Community Resident**



## Get Involved

GDS has proven success with our YES program model. Become part of this intergenerational program and movement to empower both youth and seniors. YES is an 8-week program, where local youth learn about empathy and develop skills for their future. Seniors and elders living with dementia have a sense of belonging and improve their well-being through the power of music and connection.

YES empowers our communities by elevating individual and collective consciousness. Harnessing the power of music and empathy, the program gives hope to current and future generations. To volunteer contact Program Coordinator Lenishe Lopez at [llopez@excelgds.org](mailto:llopez@excelgds.org).



For more information about Youth Engaging Seniors and our other programs visit [www.ExcelGDS.org](http://www.ExcelGDS.org) for ways to partner with us and/or become involved.

