

Intergenerational Celebrations

Older people are feeling appreciated, 4th graders are broadening their horizons, and both groups are making new friends in a Westwood, Massachusetts, Public School program to bridge the generations.

The first intergenerational program featured an exchange of letters, a luncheon, and a musical performance for families.

Photographs by Barbara M. Friedman



A serious challenge for educators is to convey to our technologically sophisticated but often culturally immature students the importance of sensitivity and humanity toward others. Vast numbers of children in our mobile society, for example, are growing up with little contact with, and thus limited understanding of, elderly people. Even their grandparents may live far away and see them only once or twice a year. Further, the media portray the young as vibrant members of society, while depicting older adults as passive and unproductive.

Consequently, by the age of 8, most children have internalized negative attitudes about old age (Rich et al. 1983), which may later affect their own views of growing old (Carstensen et al. 1982). To counter these influences, the Westwood, Massachusetts, Public Schools have been attempting, for the last five years, to instill in our students positive attitudes about the elderly.

Learning from Each Other

In 1983-84 we initiated a program of structured interactions between our 4th grade students and senior citizens

from Westwood and nearby towns. Our first program, five months in duration, paired 90 students and 32 seniors as pen pals and culminated in a luncheon for the pen pals and a musical performance to which their families were invited. During our second-year program on the "Jazz Age," 120 students and 28 seniors met weekly for four months; we celebrated the end of the program with a project fair and a musical show. The original pen pal luncheon and concert has been the most successful program and has been in effect since 1986.

Each year we devote extensive classroom time to help our students better understand the process of aging and appreciate the complexities of biological and psychological changes. We explore the sociological effects of census statistics, medical technological advancements, advertising and media impact studies, and the economics of limited incomes. Many children experience a sense of liberation in being able to verbalize some frightening subjects; for example, death is discussed with honesty and insight from a factual perspective.

"Our students are learning history through the memories of those who have lived it!"



"Feelings of fear, anxiety, and apprehension give way to concern, understanding, and genuine friendship."

We supplement class activities with frequent homework assignments, often involving parents and grandparents. And we keep parents informed of the progress of the program so that families can participate in extensions of class discussions.

"Big People Need Little People"

Parents, teachers, seniors, and students all express positive feelings about Westwood's intergenerational program. Parents, for instance, note better family interaction and increased appreciation by their children of their grandparents. In families with no grandparent nearby, or none at all, this

encounter fills a void in the children's lives.

Teachers find that their students grow more responsive and excited about the program as it progresses. One teacher remarked about the study of the Jazz Age, "Our students are learning history through the memories of those who have lived it!" Some teachers characterize this as one of the most valuable programs in their teaching experience: "Education with love."

Seniors express feelings of "being young again" and say that the experience "gives me something special to wake up for." Many relationships continue after a program has ended, and

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there is a high return rate of seniors from one year to the next. Approximately two-thirds of those participating the first year signed up again the second year. Since then, new members have joined, but of the 48 seniors participating in 1988, one-third are participating for the fifth year.

Changes in students' attitudes are freely noted by the students themselves and by their parents and teachers. Initial feelings of fear, anxiety, and apprehension give way to concern, understanding, and genuine friendship. Perhaps the best indicators of success are the comments that they "no longer fear growing old," that they "want to spend more time with my grandparents," and that they feel they "can now talk to older people, even just to be friendly and say hi." One child exclaimed, "Big people need little people."

Intangible Milestones

Each year our "celebrations" have been refined in a tangible and measured way, while our success is measured mostly in intangible but substantial milestones. The specifics of the program are far less important than that there is a program, that youngsters and seniors can take a moment out of their lives to share themselves with a person in another generation. It is that coming together that will change attitudes toward others for the better and enable today's students to reflect positively on their own lives. □

References

- Carstensen, L., S. E. Mason, and E. C. Caldwell. "Children's Attitudes Toward the Elderly: An Intergenerational Technique for Change." *Educational Gerontology* 8 (1982): 291-301.
- Rich, P. E., R. D. Myrick, and C. Campbell. "Changing Children's Perceptions of the Elderly." *Educational Gerontology* 9 (1983): 483-491.

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