

Programs to bridge the generations

engage all ages



Active-aging professionals are perfectly placed to offer programs that foster relationships between older and younger people

by Jenifer Milner

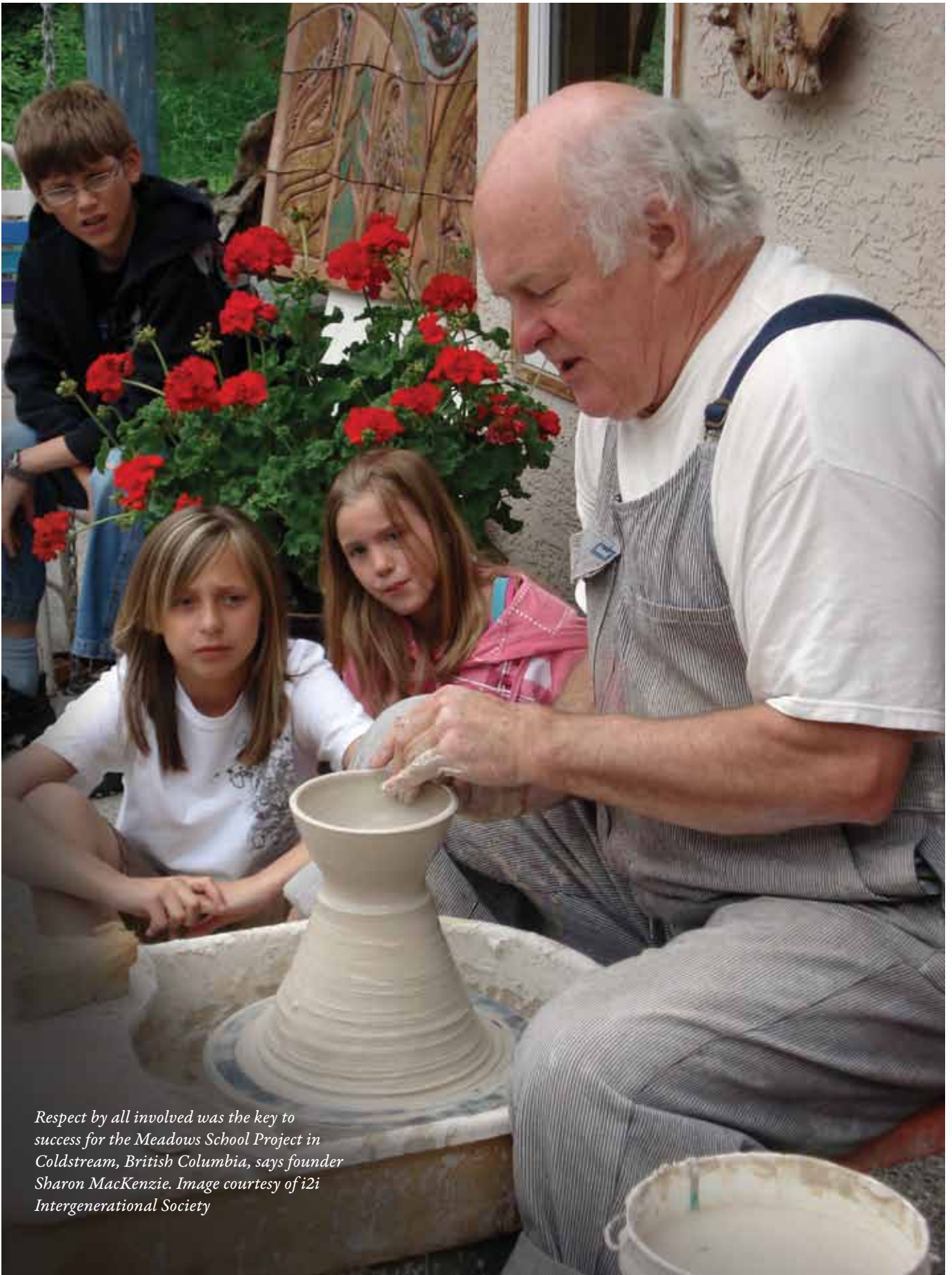
Today, even as population aging becomes more apparent,¹ we continue to hear about the challenges that will accompany this demographic shift, and little about the rich resource that age 50-plus adults represent for society. The potential of older people is devalued at a time when many are living longer, remain active and seek meaningful ways to participate in their communities.

The late anthropologist Margaret Mead recognized the pivotal role of older

adults in a society, particularly for its youth. In her 1974 article “Grandparents as Educators,” Mead lamented the diminishing contact between generations, adding that “somehow we have to get older people ... back close to growing children if we are to restore a sense of community, a knowledge of the past, and a sense of the future.” What is needed, according to Mead, is “a chance for more give and take, more of an opportunity for each to talk and each to listen.”²

The World Health Organization’s Global Age-friendly Cities Programme found from its research that, indeed, older adults are concerned about the distance between generations. During 2006, the

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Respect by all involved was the key to success for the Meadows School Project in Coldstream, British Columbia, says founder Sharon MacKenzie. Image courtesy of i2i Intergenerational Society

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Programme held focus groups with older adults and caregivers in 33 cities worldwide to find out about the barriers and advantages they experience in eight areas of urban living. When focus group members talked about social participation, for example, they stated their desire for opportunities “to socialize with and integrate with other age groups and cultures in their communities, activities and families.” Discussion in another domain, respect and social inclusion, addressed issues such as ageism and disrespectful behavior. Participants attributed these attitudes and behaviors to, among other things, “lack of contact between generations, and widespread ignorance about aging and older people.” Better integration between old and young was seen as a solution. As a result of focus group input, WHO’s *Global Age-friendly Cities Guide*, published in 2007, includes intergenerational integration and interaction among core features of an age-friendly city in these two domains.³

From educators to community services to aging organizations, many motivated professionals are working to connect the generations and foster relationships between old and young. Active-aging professionals, with their focus on wellness and quality of life, are perfectly placed to develop programs that not only support these outcomes, but also engage clients meaningfully in their communities. This article shares insights and advice from intergenerational advocates, along with information about their programs.

Generations United: fostering relationships that improve lives

Generations United, a Washington, DC-based national membership organization, exists to improve the lives of children, youth and older people through intergenerational strategies, programs and public policies. As defined by the organization, “Intergenerational programs ... increase cooperation, interaction and

exchange between people of different generations, allowing the sharing of their talents and resources, and supporting each other in relationships that benefit both the individuals and their community.”⁴

Programs typically fall into four categories, according to Generations United:⁵

- young serving old (e.g., home visits)
- older adults serving the young (e.g., mentoring programs)
- older adults and the young serving together (e.g., environmental volunteerism)
- older adults and the young sharing sites (e.g., child care centers in senior living)

While younger people gain social skills, positive role models and much more from these programs, participation enhances socialization, stimulates learning, increases emotional support and improves health in older adults, the organization explains.⁵ Communities are strengthened as people of different ages and backgrounds come together and learn about each other. Among their impacts, these interactions help to dispel negative stereotypes, transmit values, preserve traditions and enhance community spirit.⁵

“One of the keys in providing meaningful intergenerational programs is knowing the difference between an *activity* and a *program*,” says Donna Butts, executive director of Generations United. “Activities are usually one-time events with little preparation of the participants, and may have limited long-term value. Programs, on the other hand, are generally longer in duration, allowing for relationships to develop and be nurtured between generations.” Butts describes programs as “thoughtfully planned and age and ability appropriate,” with both groups prepared in advance and given time to reflect afterwards. “They are most successful,” she adds, “when

younger and older participants are involved in the planning.”

What elements can help ensure the success of intergenerational programs? “Cross staff training and planning teams are really helpful to increasing the quality and age and ability relevance of programs,” Butts states. “Understand these programs are win-win-win—each generation gets something and gives something when they participate. In addition, engaging future participants when possible ensures they ‘own’ the program.”

Butts also stresses the importance of the relationship between program partners. “Whether taking first steps or working to increase the quality of an existing intergenerational program, develop and maintain a strong relationship with your partner,” she advises.

When the generations come together, communities thrive and grow. Recently, Generations United and MetLife Foundation presented the Best Intergenerational Communities Award “to heighten awareness of the important role that intergenerational solidarity plays in building strong, vibrant communities.” Brief profiles of the five winners appear in the sidebar on page 41.

Butts reports that the first year of this initiative “has been a success, so we are looking forward to continuing and growing the awards program. Our goal,” she reveals, “is to spark more communities to intentionally become intergenerational hot spots.”

County of San Diego: promoting intergenerational work for healthy communities

One such hot spot of intergenerational collaboration is the County of San Diego, California, winner of a Best Intergenerational Communities Award. The

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'Piggybacking' on the synergy for community gardens created in San Diego County, California, through a federally funded public health initiative, the county's Intergenerational Program worked with interested garden projects to develop intergenerational opportunities. Photo: Denise G. Nelesen, County of San Diego

local Area Agency on Aging—and advocate for “intergenerational work”—is Aging & Independence Services (AIS), which is part of the county's Health & Human Services Agency (HHSA). With areas of focus that include health independence services (“promoting wellness”) and community enrichment (“enhancing quality of life”),⁶ AIS promotes healthy and vital aging through intergenerational programs. These opportunities also allow the agency to tap into the county's older population to help address a variety of community concerns.

The AIS Intergenerational Program, adopted in 2002,⁷ aims to assist communities in looking “for intergenerational opportunities in their planning and development, and help turn those ideas into reality.”⁸ This can mean anything from supporting collaborations of different community partners, to promotional expertise and funding (through

such sources as the Older Americans Act and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), to advocating for program development.

In a permanent position approved in 2003 by the county's Board of Supervisors, Intergenerational Coordinator Diane Hunter helps establish, implement and sustain such programs. Creating this position “is really one of the most significant achievements to date for the AIS initiative,” Hunter says. “It's important to have someone committed to this role—someone who can promote these opportunities to the county.”

Through its Intergenerational Program, AIS both facilitates and provides “meaningful activities and services” to bring the generations together.⁸ One county-created program—and another significant achievement—is Workforce Academy for Youth (WAY), implemented in 2006. “We saw that there was a need to

provide a transition into adulthood for foster youth who are ‘aging out’ of the system,” states Hunter. Collaborating with different agencies, AIS came up with the idea of a six-month paid internship within the county. WAY, now a signature program, provides youth with employment, training, and mentoring support from an on-site job coach and an age 50-plus life skills coach.⁷ These mentorships have been well-received, according to Hunter, and lifetime relationships have developed between the youth and older adults.

Another program, the Intergenerational Games, heads into its 12th year of operation in 2012. A collaboration between AIS and its Community Action Network of service providers, this one-day event promotes healthy activity along with intergenerational connections. AIS staff recruit approximately 80–100 older adults by presenting at social clubs, and spend a day setting up for the games. Service providers sponsor the event, which can take the form of in-kind donations, staff time, meals and funding. To help stage the event, AIS also partners with others, such as staff from city parks and recreation departments and YMCAs.

Hunter calls the Intergenerational Games an “icebreaker.” Older adults find out more about intergenerational experiences and “get their feet wet,” she says, “while youth not only learn they have things in common with older adults, but also learn about aging.” Importantly, the Games are breaking down stereotypes of aging, Hunter believes. “These older adults are role models, and they're modeling healthy, active aging. Essays completed by youth show that participating in the event has had a positive impact on what they think of older people.”

The San Marcos Community Garden is also an example of a program that promotes healthy activity—along with access to fresh fruits and vegetables—for

young and old. The San Marcos Senior Center, which adjoins a middle school, turned its community garden into an intergenerational program with a US\$10,000 grant from the county to the City of San Marcos. Such partnerships help position intergenerational work for success and sustainability.

“If we’re able to collaborate and get more organizations to support and be involved in an intergenerational program, then it is not as at risk when funding gets tight,” stresses Hunter. “And this is what the County of San Diego is good at—collaborating.” For example, a lot of agencies within the county will at-

tend this year’s summit, “Live Well, San Diego! Building Healthy Communities for All Ages”, which focuses on intergenerational work. (“Live Well, San Diego!” is the county’s 10-year initiative to build better health.)

To support a robust intergenerational program at the county level, Hunter advises identifying champions within the county government. “Find people who have a passion for, and understand the value of, older adults and bringing the generations together,” she says. In San Diego County, Pamela Smith, AIS director and HHS deputy director, is the biggest advocate for intergenerational

work. Hunter believes that Smith’s advocacy has been one reason for their program’s success.

“We continue to educate people, and maximize funding,” Hunter adds. “It doesn’t necessarily take a lot of funding to do intergenerational work. These programs are economical and have an impact. They create a win-win-win for funders, youth and older adults by sharing resources, utilizing individual strengths to meet needs, and developing community. They are dollars well spent.”

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Resources

Internet

County of San Diego, Aging & Independence Services

www.sdcounty.ca.gov/hhsa/programs/ais

Generations United

www.gu.org

This resource-rich website includes activity planning guides, program evaluation information, and a program directory. Visitors can sign up for the weekly e-newsletter *Generations This Week*, webinar series and e-alerts and learn about Generations United’s biennial international conference. Each year, in late fall, the organization also issues a signature report on an important aspect of intergenerational living.

i2i Intergenerational Society

www.intergenerational.ca

The i2i website offers free resources for educators, healthcare professionals and communities. Among these are program ideas, an Intergenerational Community Toolkit, and a national curriculum called “Across the Generations.”

Neighbors Growing Together

www.intergenerational.claahs.vt.edu/neighbors/index.html

Print

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Neighbors Growing Together: demonstrating best practices in shared sites

Optimizing resources while providing services for young and old are hallmarks of intergenerational shared sites, as they are known in Generations United terminology (intergenerational day care or inter/multigenerational centers in other terminology). Neighbors Growing Together (Neighbors), located at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia, is a shared site intergenerational care community, notes Shannon Jarrott, PhD, an associate professor of Human Development at the university, and Neighbors' director of intergenerational programs.

The award-winning Neighbors program has grown from Human Development's Adult Day Services and Child Development Center for Learning and Research, which have been co-located since 1991. The program's purpose "is to support the development of children and older-adult clients by building intergenerational relationships," Jarrott says. "In so doing, we are able to build a sense of community with two centers and involve families and students from Virginia Tech; staff are able to interact and support each other—and the whole is greater than the sum of our parts."

Although its mission (informed by the land-grant university mission) includes intergenerational collaboration involving teaching, research and outreach, Neighbors "is a lot like other community-based programs, because we're serving families whose relatives need care," continues Jarrott. On a daily basis, the program supports 41 children, 18 older adults (out of 25 total) with various cognitive and physical challenges, and their families. Steps are taken to provide all of the children with weekly opportunities to see their older counterparts, which is important, she says. So Neighbors brings the generations together in planned activities such as crafts, music, games and walks,⁹ as well as impromptu visits. Ac-



Meadows School Project participants formed relationships that had a profound impact on young and old alike in British Columbia's Coldstream community, breaking down negative stereotypes in both groups. Image courtesy of i2i Intergenerational Society

tivities are set up so young and old must collaborate to succeed. "Our programming is flexible, but intentional," Jarrott emphasizes.

The program's setting within an academic department, however, ensures some assistance with operating funds and resources, including "a lot of student resources," Jarrott acknowledges. Through Neighbors, students gain firsthand experience in shaping intergenerational programming. Their involvement allows the program to try different things that rely on generous staffing levels—a student-run intergenerational cooking club, for example.

In addition, there is always an evaluation component. "PhDs and faculty are affiliated with the centers, and we are able to study, in effect, what's working with the program, what the challenges are and how to address them effectively," Jarrott explains. "So practice informs research, and research informs practice. We can then share what we learn with other organizations."

Among the most important things that Jarrott has learned through the Neighbors program is the importance of administrative support and collaboration. "Staff at intergenerational shared sites are very busy doing other things, so we see a lot of intergenerational programs in the community fail when they lack admin support," she says. Neighbors' administrators help identify staff responsibilities for intergenerational programming and assessment, and designate time "off the floor" for staff to plan.

What Neighbors gains, too, from its student resources and admin support is the ability to invest more time in theory- and evidence-based programming, which a lot of practitioners don't have time to do, according to Jarrott. "A lot of intergenerational programs have anecdotal evidence that what they're doing is working," she comments. "But it is difficult for these programs to demonstrate to others—such as funders—that they are achieving outcomes that are impor-

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Children and older adults interact through Neighbors Growing Together at Virginia Tech. Courtesy of University Relations, Virginia Tech

tant to families and others accessing services.” Through Neighbors’ research, program staff have found that there are some theory- and evidence-based practices that are useful.

To share and demonstrate shared site best practices with others, program staff provide training and consultation, and welcome visits from practitioners. They also share best practices through conference presentations and publications. These include *Tried and True*, a guide for practitioners, published by Generations United in 2006 (see “Resources” on page 37).

Jarrott advises those interested in developing an intergenerational shared site “to first look at the needs in your community—whether you define that as a town, city, neighborhood or program—and look at the resources and talents available. Then, be very intentional about selecting your partner. It is hard to run an intergenerational program when one partner is doing the bulk of the work,” she states.

Evaluation is really the key to success, though, in Jarrott’s view. “A lot of intergenerational research is descriptive and focuses on short-term outcomes, such as how the older adults and kids enjoy the activity. We need to look at other outcomes of interest in today’s society, such

as school readiness, health and cost-effectiveness outcomes related to these programs.”

While she believes there is no limit to what is possible with an intergenerational approach, Jarrott offers one important caveat: Participation should always be voluntary. For older men and women who choose to work with children, “intergenerational programs offer the opportunity to reclaim a role at a time when many are being taken away,” she says. “And for children, when they opt to interact with older adults, they learn that they can share their joy and talents with adults of all ages and abilities.” These children develop more positive ideas of older adults and aging, Jarrott says—“and are put on the path to a happy old age.”

Meadows School Project and i2i: doing things differently

It was the divide between young and old, and her desire to break down their negative stereotypes of each other, that motivated Sharon MacKenzie to develop the Meadows School Project™ in the community of Coldstream, British Columbia. MacKenzie, an educator with 30 years’ experience and founder of the i2i Intergenerational Society, had organized many intergenerational events over her career, but felt they did little to truly improve understanding between participants. The success of French immersion programs in Canada’s schools inspired her to try something similar with her students: a full intergenerational immersion.

Every year from 2000 to 2008, the Meadows School Project relocated 30 students from Kidston Elementary School to Coldstream Meadows Retirement Community for two months of the school year—five weeks in the fall, three weeks in the spring, and two or three visits in each intervening month. Additional activities took place at the school for those older adults interested in attending.

The Kidston students, who ranged in age from 9 to 14, were bussed from the school to the assisted-living residence each day, along with MacKenzie. With a ring of the bell to signify the group was on the grounds, they then commenced a morning review and class in the Coldstream Meadows chapel. “The building’s large windows and easy accessibility encouraged community residents to look in on classes and, over time, a number would come and sit in or participate,” she observes. “Anyone who wants to do this kind of program would benefit from that kind of setting.”

Parameters of the Meadows School Project included studying the government-mandated curriculum, doing a service module (volunteering on-site for 90 minutes per week), and spending time with participating Coldstream Meadows residents. “The service module was important for showing the seniors that the kids had a work ethic—and if they didn’t, the seniors let them know it,” says MacKenzie. “In addition, the kids discovered that they didn’t need marks or goodies to volunteer; that they could volunteer just because they wanted to help.” Another upside of the students’ service was the freeing up of the Coldstream Meadows staff to do other things for the community.

Older adults and students had daily one-on-one time following morning classes, which allowed the students to learn about subjects through people’s lives. “They saw what aging can do, what disease can do, and what health and activity can do over a lifetime,” MacKenzie remarks. As relationships blossomed, the impact was profound. “The older adults felt they were helping the kids, and there was something to look forward to every day,” she explains. “They were happier, more active, and had a greater sense of purpose.”

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America's five Best Intergenerational Communities

Presented for the first time in March 2012, the MetLife Foundation/Generations United Best Intergenerational Communities Award is intended to heighten awareness of the important role that intergenerational solidarity plays in building strong, vibrant communities. All of the five winning communities showed exceptional commitment to integrating intergenerational practices into all aspects of community life, according to the award announcement. Their programs are highlighted below:

Georgetown, Texas

Georgetown sustains intergenerational efforts by offering older adults and youth opportunities to develop their "community assets" or talents in service to others through volunteer projects. The Georgetown Independent School District (GISD) leads many intergenerational program efforts, engaging residents living in Georgetown's Sun City retirement community. These older adults make up a third of the city's population and are busy mentoring and tutoring young people. The high school and Sun City choirs perform jointly in intergenerational choirs, and school buses transport Sun City residents to the high school football games to cheer their young neighbors. Local veterans are honored at school Veterans Day ceremonies. This intense interaction with young people led Sun City residents to vote overwhelmingly in favor of local school bonds.

Lamoni, Iowa

Lamoni has numerous strong intergenerational practices benefiting all ages. The Lamoni SAFE Coalition provides support for local families and involves high school students, Graceland University students, young adults, and people in midlife and later life who work together to identify and address local needs. Graceland University students are active volunteers with school children, older adults, and local community organizations. High school students

teach computer skills to older individuals. The weekly Lunch Buddies mentoring program brings mentors of all ages to the local elementary school. Additional intergenerational programs include a Service Learning Club that provides a wide array of services for older adults and Across Ages mentoring that pairs middle school youth with adults ages 55 and over. The Community Center offers community garden plots for adoption, encouraging participation of mixed-age gardeners tending to their plots.

Oberlin, Ohio

Collaboration and community service are a big part of life in Oberlin. The City of Oberlin has built strong alliances with community organizations to ensure that Oberlin is an intergenerational community. All work closely together to develop programs that support and encourage interaction among different generations and address concerns and challenges using intergenerational techniques to achieve the goals. The Kendal at Oberlin Retirement Community, with its Volunteer Clearing House, is a beehive of intergenerational programs, as well. The Kendal Early Learning Center, located in the retirement community, provides day care in an intergenerational setting. Oberlin elementary schools have a Grandparent Readers Program and a Listening Post Program, providing opportunities for children to interact regularly, one-on-one, with older adults.

San Diego County, California

In California, the County of San Diego has invested heavily in intergenerational practices, including funding a full-time staff position of Intergenerational Coordinator. That investment has paid big returns: Through intergenerational programs, the county has employed residents' strengths to expand services and address serious challenges. Residents benefit by having the opportunity to use their talents and creativity to contribute to the county's well-being and vibrancy. The county also uses cross-agency funding to support innovative intergenerational

programs and activities to address local needs. Its libraries and Parks and Recreation department offer intergenerational art, math, reading and jazz programs. Older adults take part in a Workforce Academy for Youth, mentoring foster youth for six months as they get ready to leave the foster system and join the work world. Young people have the opportunity to join the Legacy Corps Program, where they serve caregivers and learn about the aging process. The county also works with providers that serve older adults and youth to sponsor Resident and Youth Leadership Academies.

Virginia Planning District 10

Virginia Planning District 10 is a pioneer of the intergenerational movement, having integrated intergenerational practices into community life starting in 1975. In 2003, it created the "2020 Plan: Aging in Community" to provide a clear blueprint the community could follow in its quest to become a truly great intergenerational place to live. The success of the 2020 Plan led the Planning District to create a Viable Futures Toolkit, which other communities can use to develop their intergenerational practices. The Jefferson Area Board of Aging (JABA) plays a pivotal role in the Planning District's intergenerational efforts. All eight of JABA's community centers have active intergenerational programs. In addition, two adult day care centers share their facilities with child care centers. The older adults and children attending those centers interact on a daily basis. There are also intergenerational songwriting/performance programs, tutoring opportunities, vocational education programs, and nutrition initiatives. Community gardens yield locally grown food that is used to feed older adults at the local community and seniors centers.

Source: Adapted from the MetLife Foundation/Generations United announcement on March 28, 2012

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San Diego County's Intergenerational Games give youth the opportunity to see healthy, active aging in action. Photo: Denise G. Nelesen, County of San Diego

Coldstream Meadows residents went from being a little uncertain about the program at its start to embracing it wholeheartedly, with 95% eventually taking part, reports MacKenzie. In fact, the community itself leveraged its participation into a selling feature for prospective residents. Some students stayed involved with their “senior buddies” and the community long-term, volunteering throughout high school, coming back for visits and funerals, and going on to various helping roles.

“The program taught the kids—and their parents—not to be afraid of getting old,” MacKenzie continues. “They realized that older adults are funny and enjoy good times, that they are willing to participate in things, and that they love sharing a joke.” In short, stereotypes were overturned.

The Meadows School Project has recently been replicated in the Too Cool 4 School Project, launched in Williams Lake, BC, last September. As with all intergenerational programs, the key in developing an intergenerational immersion such as this is to include people from all generations—students, older adults and community staff—right through the planning stage, MacKenzie notes. “The plan then becomes theirs, localized, and works in their specific setting.” Partnerships and mentorships are important. So, too, is respect. “Whatever you do has to be respectful,” she adds—“respectful and fun.”

In 2008, MacKenzie established the not-for-profit i2i Intergenerational Society to help Canadians build bridges between generations. i2i (which stands for “invitation to intergenerational immersion”) does this by promoting intergenerational programs and learning opportunities, and assisting in developing intergenerational connections.¹⁰ The society is positioned as a repository for, among other things, information and resources on intergenerational relations.

“‘Intergenerational’ is really an orientation, not a program or a prescribed set of plans and outcomes,” MacKenzie believes. “It’s not about doing different things, but doing things differently.

“So, before you do or plan anything, put on intergenerational glasses,” MacKenzie urges active-aging professionals. “Ask yourself: Am I bringing all ages I can connect with for planning, preparation, implementation, celebration and evaluation? If you do that,” she says, “you’re giving people of all ages opportunities to be personally responsible and take part in a very honest way in everything that’s happening.”

Jenifer Milner is editor-in-chief of the Journal on Active Aging®.

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