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Generations of friends

by Sharon MacKenzie

My Grade 6s and I work on a cross-generational curriculum for part of the school year. On the first of October, we move our classroom into the chapel of the Coldstream Meadows seniors' residence. We stay five weeks, building cross-generational friendships. How incredibly rich these four years have been for me, getting to know the seniors at this retirement community, watching the Grade 6s interact with them daily. Who would have thought the project could be so powerful, so filled with love?

It wasn't all easy. When we began, four years ago, we waited in our little chapel classroom for three weeks before one senior ventured to make contact with us. The stereotypes are so strong, so hard to break down. The students were ready for their senior buddies, but we seemed to be getting nowhere.

Then, one day, thanks to dear, adventuresome 90-year-old Mrs. French, we had a breakthrough. She agreed to come to the chapel to talk to the children. That tidy little English lady had us rolling in the aisle. She told us that her first job was at Eaton's in Toronto, and she was standing in the store, being given instructions by her supervisor, when the elastic in her underpants broke. She said, "I never took my eyes off of my supervisor's face. I just bent down, picked those pants up, stuffed them into my pinafore pocket and carried on like nothing unusual had happened!" Mrs. French continued to delight us with her stories, and soon had worked her magic on other seniors. Suddenly, we were making the connections of which we had dreamed. Sadly, we were due back at our home school in just a week. They suddenly wanted to take us up on our offers of the one-hour twice-a-day buddy program. They were ready to walk, talk, be read to, and play pool and shuffleboard. They were even ready to just share a roll of candies. There were tears for both generations, some for opportunity lost, and some for new friendship gained.

When we returned the following year, seniors lined up with canes and walkers to watch us unload our boxes. Within hours, we were well into our project mandate. One-third of the program was academics. We did the study of the body, and signs of aging, which related back to why we should take good care of ourselves while we are younger, to prepare for future good health. We also got caught up in a study of local history—we had it walking and talking all around us! I think we poked holes in the wall map in the chapel showing the birthplaces of the seniors with whom we worked.

Oh, and the math! That old Eaton's catalogue came in handy, providing lessons on spending family savings on scratchy undershirts and cream separators. We learned a great deal about inflation and the value of a dollar. Many of the seniors saw our workbooks and got quite a chuckle out of showing the children their first bike or those comical one-piece over-the-shoulders bathing suits for men. Bathing took on a whole new meaning one day on a visit to the local cemetery. The children read an inscription on a headstone: "Died while bathing in Long Lake." They were shocked that a young gentleman could drown having a bath, but then the light bulb went on when they realized the language of the day meant the young man had been swimming.

Dealing with language was interesting in more ways than one. The children quickly learned that studying and going to school at a seniors' home requires a language adjustment—slower speech, shorter phrases, enunciating, and no "You guys" or "Huh?" They made the transition well, though, and would catch themselves the odd time. Both they and their senior buddy would have a good laugh. One day, Mr. Roma accidentally

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let a wee profanity slip when he hit the cue ball into the pocket. Now, that was worth writing home about! I got the last laugh, though. When the wellness co-ordinator asked each of the children for a short comment for the community newspaper, describing their five-week stay in the beautiful garden setting, one student wrote "Nice seniory." Indeed it was, however you spell it.

On the first day back that third year, Mr. Morse was sitting at one of the pews pulled up to the student worktable. "Mr. Morse, welcome," I said; to which he responded, "I'm your new student. Sign me up!" He stayed through the whole morning with us, and although seniors frequently would drop in, having Mr. Morse greet us in that way on our first day of Meadows School warmed our hearts. We had become us.

Another third of our time was spent in service. The children have learned how to set tables, rake leaves, wash cars, and clean windows. They have helped Mr. Pascal in the garden. Once or twice, I've seen him slip a chocolate bar or two to students who came to visit while he was digging and pruning. He flew one of the biggest bombers during the war. He's such a diminutive man; it's hard to imagine him in such a profession.

The best third of all happened twice-a-day for an hour. That's when the children buddy up with the seniors. What fun they have! They so love their uninterrupted time talking, laughing, listening to the old stories again and sometimes again. They have the magic of shared time. The seniors have the time, and the children need that time.

We revisit the residence regularly after our initial five-week immersion. Every time, the same love is there waiting, and every time it grows a little more. We're actually returning for an additional three weeks in the spring this year. In a way, it's the planning to get back together that keeps us all going, because the being apart is hard now. We have become connected, right across the generations.

I call myself the teacher, but I really am a facilitator. How could something so beautiful, so gentle, and so powerful be so easy, and right under our noses? I hope we are breaking down barriers forever. The children will never forget this time with the older generation, and, as Mrs. Lindle said just before we left, "I want them to stay. They must come back. They are family."

Have a wonderful year. Even though the global front looks scary and uncertain, some good things never change. We will continue to be at the Meadows School every fall and again in the spring. I wish more children and seniors could share this amazing learning experience. I dream that other teachers, in this province and all across Canada, will think about participating, too.

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