

Teens-Seniors Connections Correcting Misconceptions & Building Bonds

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Eight years ago, a visionary middle-school teacher named LaVerne Toler approached the Interages Center in Wheaton to ask if some of her kids could be paired with seniors to perform community service. SETS, or Self Esteem Through Service, was born, and every three weeks since then, small groups of teenagers in Montgomery County have met with adults four to six times their age to make sandwiches for the homeless, greeting cards for sick children and simply to get acquainted.

They can be powerful supports to each other -- such teen-senior alliances -- joining the energy and idealism of youth with the patience and wisdom of age. Teens, many of whom will live longer than any previous generation, can study firsthand the meaning of that long life to come. Seniors have someone with whom they can share good ideas and bad jokes. Each can make the other feel useful, a rare gift for both in a middle-age-obsessed society.

The obstacles to such collaborations are numerous. Kids get paying jobs, or simply don't show. The elderly move away, become senile, and die. Nonetheless, organizations and businesses around the country are catching on to the potential. Microsoft Corp., for example, provides software and technical assistance to high school seniors in Mt. Rainier, Wash., who teach computer skills to senior citizens. The senior citizens then are able to communicate with grandchildren, research family history and build Web sites. In a similar project in Seattle, high-school students show senior citizens how to e-mail third- and fourth-grade Computer Pals.

One of Microsoft's latest ventures is at Edgewood Terrace in Northeast Washington where Community Preservation and Development Corp. (CPDC), the nonprofit corporation that owns the rental community, is nursing a new Teens to Seniors program. Five teen/senior pairs shop, cook, or do homework together, and there are plans to put them together on computers to build a database for the community's three resident associations.

Directors of these programs say attitude is the biggest hurdle in the beginning. Dorothy Tucker, CPDC's program director, says some seniors she approached for that initiative saw teens as "troubled, dangerous people that they should not get involved with." At the same time, some of Edgewood's teens "thought seniors were boring, dull and confused."

Edgewood seemed to be a natural, however, for pairing teens and seniors because the 16-acre, 884-unit site was home to so many kids and elderly people. Teens and seniors already worked together on the resident association boards, and helped each other out informally.

Keesha Hill, for example, a junior at Dunbar High School, was a companion to Dorothy Mann, a housebound senior in her building. She would take over fried chicken and greens, and look after

Mann's cat, O.J. She would talk to "Miss Mann," as she called her friend, about God and grades. Hill's grandparents were either dead or lived far away; Miss Mann became her grandma.

One afternoon last fall, while watching Ricki Lake on television, Hill heard from her mother that Dorothy Mann had died.

"It was fast, just like this," Hill recalls, snapping her fingers. "You know how people pass away. I felt real bad." She not only felt bad, she started acting bad, talking back to her mom, skipping school one day.

Hill is telling some of this to a new, old friend, Richard Greene, a 74-year-old resident at Edgewood. CPDC has put the two of them together, but Hill's feelings from the death of her former friend are still raw. She's not sure she's ready for another match, formal or informal. Greene, however, is an adept talker -- and listener.

"Who suffered from that?" he asks about her misbehavior.

"I did," she answers. "I got three weeks of punishment. I couldn't go anywhere, make no phone calls, no e-mail."

"And what are you doing now?" Greene moves her on.

"Trying to get the rest of my education."

Now, Greene, a retired Smithsonian security guard, has lots of questions. Is she going to apply for a scholarship? What is her grade point average? She'll have to maintain an A/B average to be accepted into any good college or university, he reminds her. Affirmative action won't pave the way anymore.

"I've seen you on the keys," Greene nods toward a computer room with banks of new Dell computers. "You're good. Where did you get that?"

Hill tells him she learned the basics at a computer class in the complex. "Then I started practicing." "Studying in school is just like that." Green is going somewhere with this. "Your brain is a computer. You have to practice using it."

Hill nods. When Greene leaves, she volunteers, "He was interesting. I learned something from him." She might look him up, she says, "when I feel more comfortable at doing that kind of thing again."

There is no "might" from Noah Mitchum, a red-headed eighth-grader at Sligo Middle School who takes part in Toler's SETS program. "I learn a lot from the seniors," the affable 14-year-old says shortly after arriving at Leafy House, a subsidized apartment building for senior citizens in Kensington. On an earlier visit to Leafy, one of the elderly men demonstrated how an old-fashioned penknife works. "I didn't know you could use knives for pens," Mitchum says.

Unlike the Edgewood program, SETS is highly structured. At the beginning of the school year, Sligo students hear a lecture on aging by Barbara Hammack of Interages. They travel to Leafy

House every three weeks after that for about an hour with the seniors. Back in the classroom with Toler, they discuss what they've witnessed and learned and want to know more about.

Toler, Mitchum's teacher, says she originally solicited Interages' help because she wanted her students, a bright but vulnerable population, to learn that "life is about giving as well as taking." Hammack was intrigued with Toler's concept because she believed that kids in Montgomery County were growing up with no sense of history and that seniors, a powerful voting block, had no idea what it was like to be young. She and Toler agreed that the two populations should be asked to do things together. "If someone calls and asks where is there a nursing home where kids can sing Christmas carols, I say look in the phone book," Hammack says. "That's not what we're about."

On the day that he is to make valentines at Leafy House, Mitchum takes his place at a table next to Ted Miller, a 73-year-old retired mechanic. Miller has been telling jokes before the kids arrive but as he sits down, he goes quiet. He watches Mitchum deftly cut a heart out of red construction paper and begin to stencil another heart on top using a white doily. Miller asks for a white doily and Mitchum hands it to him; Miller draws a smiley face on the doily with pink magic marker while continuing to watch Mitchum's nimbler fingers out of the corner of his eye.

Mitchum glances at Miller's smiley face. "You know what they say, laughter is the best medicine." "They also say life isn't a laughing matter," Miller comes back.

Mitchum looks up. "I've heard that, too."

"It's worth repeating," Miller says.

Mitchum has completed his rather elaborate valentine and has started making another. Miller, unhappy with his first smiley face, removes his doily, grabs another and draws another face with bigger eyes and a broader smile.

"It's not much better," he says glumly to his young partner.

"I think they're both fine," Mitchum says.

For information on how to start a teen-senior program, contact Interages, a resource center: 301-949-3551.

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