

Neighbors in Autumn: Service Learning with Elders

Victoria L. Gadecki

Bouquets of Paper

It was spring, and once again our sixth-grade team of teachers was conducting a science unit of study on plants. I came across a new pattern for making paper flowers. Students would use the pattern to cut out the leaves, stamen, petals, stigma, and pistils, then attach these parts to the “stem” (a straw). Students had to name and tell the function of each part of the flower, and take a quiz on the lesson.

Afterwards, rather than allow these attractive but fragile paper creations to get mashed down in the bottom of the students’ book bags, we took a minute of class time to ponder how we might reuse or recycle them. A student, Walt, raised his hand, “My mom works as an administrator at a retirement home,” he said. “Could we donate them there?”

“That sounds like a good idea. Discuss it with your mother.”

Walt’s mother agreed that donating the flowers to the retirement home was a great idea. A few students brought in unused bud vases, which they had discovered inside closets, garages, and attics. Some kids even got their parents to ask co-workers for donations of old or unused vases. We collected fifty vases over a week, and students put three flowers into each vase.

Next, students made Easter and spring celebration cards with cheerful sayings, edited each other’s cards, and then colored them in with Magic Markers. They attached one card to each vase of flowers.

The following week, Walt and two of his classmates accompanied me to his mother’s retirement home. They knocked on the door of each resident, walked in, and introduced themselves. As they gave each resident a vase of flowers and a card, conversation took off.

“Did you make these yourselves?”

“Yes, we did.”

“Did you make them in art class?”

“No, we made them in science, while we were studying plants.”

“They are beautiful!”

“Thank you.”

“Where do you go to school?”

The conversation would continue on about other topics. Some residents were more talkative than others, but all were very enthusiastic about getting the flowers and the visit. We received a thank you note from Walt’s mother telling us how much the residents appreciated the gifts of flowers, cards, and conversation.

At the end of that school year, I wondered if we could not build on this small success. I contacted Walt’s mother and asked if my twenty-seven students could again deliver flowers and do things on various holidays so that more students could deliver gifts and visit with the residents at various times throughout the school year. She quickly agreed, and we worked together to plan some events, and also to obtain the various permission forms from residents, students, family members, and administrators.

That was the first year of our relationship with this retirement home. For the last four years, our sixth grade team has been developing this relationship through a service-learning project that involves science, language arts, math, art, and social studies. It runs from September through June, during which, on four or five occasions, students and residents come together to visit, have some fun, and learn.

Classroom Preparation

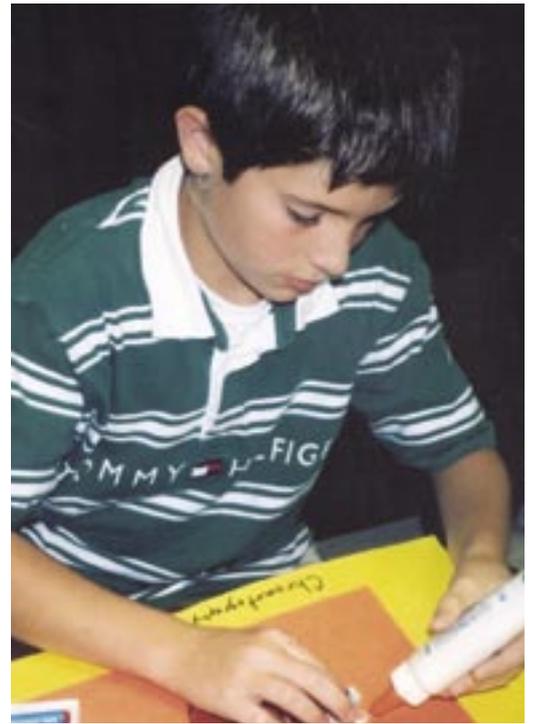
In order to prepare my students for their visits to the retirement home, I read *The Sunsets of Miss Olivia Wiggins*, by Lester L. Laminach. The story helps children realize that even though an old person doesn’t appear to be alert, they may still know what’s going on. The story is about a great-grandmother, grandma, and grandchild. The things they say and do help the Great-Grandma remember old times. We discussed this story and its relevance to our partnership with the retirement home. Students ask about ways they might help the residents remember things. We discuss various things about the book and the local retirement home.

One student asked, “What if I go to visit and they don’t have anything to say?”

Another commented, “Then you start talking and that will make them think of other things and before you know it they’ll talk.”

A child who visited his grandmother often said, “You won’t get a word in. They’ll do all of the talking.”

Our discussion continued about ways to feel more comfortable with the elderly persons and ways to help make the residents feel more comfortable with them, such as being polite, asking if they are comfortable, listening carefully to their stories and memories.



Seasonal Activities: Autumn

Each year we have found more ways to tie our visits to the retirement home into the sixth grade curriculum. Our first involvement for last year was at Thanksgiving. Students, who were studying chromatography in science, made colorful turkey placemats for the residents with coffee filters and markers.

Students folded the coffee filters in half again and again until there were sixteen folded sections. They cut along the folds to make strips, then drew colorful lines along the strips with a rainbow of water-soluble felt-tipped pens. When dipped into water, the colored ink seeped through the strips of the coffee filter, making “feathers” appear. These pieces dried overnight.

Next the students used a pattern to cut out a paper turkey body

out of brown construction paper. They drew facial features, toes, wattle, and other details on the turkey’s body. Students placed the turkey bodies on a piece of orange construction paper, then placed the tips of the feathers underneath the bodies and glued everything in place.

Students took the orange piece of construction paper and cut it onto a large piece of placemat-size yellow construction paper. They turned the yellow paper over and wrote down a brief paragraph explaining what chromatography is and how they used it to make their paper turkey placemats. The director of the retirement home said their dining room looked bright and festive on Thanksgiving Day, and the residents really enjoyed using those placemats.

Winter

In December, sixth grade students were studying religion in Medieval Rome. They learned that there are a lot of cathedrals in Rome, which is the capital of Italy. Students learned how the glass for the windows was made out of sand and different minerals that were heated to extremely hot temperatures. Then patterns were made and glass pieces were used to fill in the patterns in order to create the designs in the windows. Lead was used around the pieces of glass. Members of the cathedrals would hold a competition to see who could craft the fanciest stained-glass windows.

Then we made “stained glass” holiday cards for the residents. Each student was given a black piece of construction paper that was approximately 4 by 8 inches, scissors, and instructions: fold the construction paper in half again and again to produce an accordion shape. Then cut the paper in several different spots and in several different shapes. (This activity is similar to how children make paper snowflakes). The adults then laminated each black “snowflake.” Students used permanent marking pens to color their laminated cutouts in several bright colors.

I used our Ellison Machine to complete the next part. I took a 9x12 inch piece of red or green construction paper and folded it into fourths. I put the entire piece in an Ellison stamp machine and cut out shapes—trees, snowmen, and stars. The part that we used for these cards was the actual shell of the cutout that most people would throw away. We saved the inside shape that we cut out for other uses. Each student selected a shape. Then they opened up the folded cutout and glued in their brightly colored snowflake. On the other part of the folded card, they attached a white piece of construction paper. They folded the construction paper back and had a stained-glass holiday card. Students signed their names to their cards. The residents enjoyed receiving these unique cards. Many asked the students how they made them, and the children were challenged to explain the process.

A Box for Knick Knacks and Memories

For the next activity, students decorated tissue boxes during math and social studies class. In math, they were working with surface area. Each student measured the edges of a cube-shaped tissue box (which were all the same size). Students then calculated the surface area of each box. They measured out, on white contact paper, a shape that would cover the box. They cut it out and glued it to the box. Students found that it was easier to wrap the one piece all around the box as opposed to using a separate piece of paper to cover each side. The bottom remained uncovered and they measured and cut a separate piece of contact paper for the top. They cut out the opening. Finally,

students cut out small pieces of construction paper and glued them to make pictures on each side of each box. This activity fit in with their social studies unit on Roman art and mosaics, which students saw illustrated in several books.

Spring Pop Ups

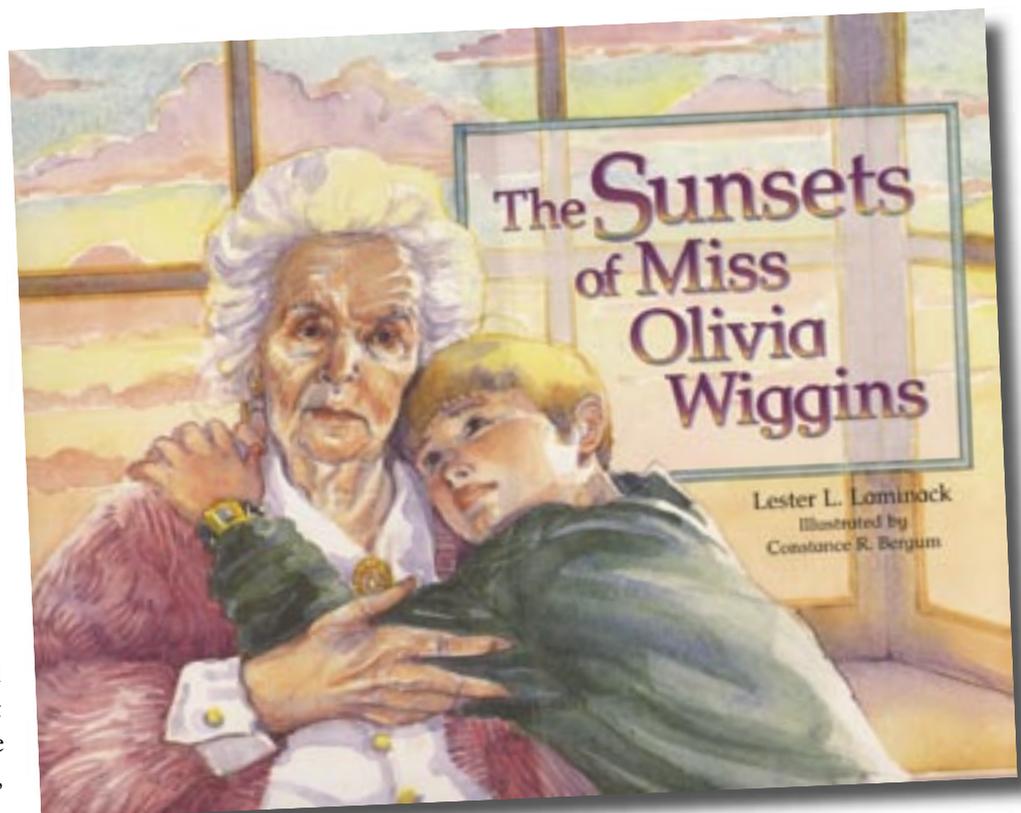
The art teacher led the service project’s Valentine’s Day activity. She helped students make construction paper pop-up cards. Students folded construction paper in half, then cut out different sizes and colors of hearts and attached them to the outside of each card. Students cut out strips of paper and folded them accordion-like. They attached one end of the strip to the card, the other end to the heart, so that when someone opened the card, the heart would pop up. The art teacher gave the cards to the language arts teacher, who was conducting a unit of study on poetry. The students each wrote a Valentine poem to go inside each card.

Conversations

Whenever we made the cards or gifts for the residents, students went to the center and delivered them door-to-door. It seemed like the students learned especially well the content of those lessons that involved our trips to the residents. They also learned to give to others and to converse with people from another generation. The residents benefited by the visits and company of these students.

Every time we delivered our gifts, students saw reminders of what they made and delivered earlier in the year and what previous year’s students left. The residents did seem to appreciate whatever the children had made for them. However, both the residents and the children enjoyed the conversations the most.

The students enjoyed these interactions and the whole experience. They were communicating with



parents, teachers, other adults, and their peers in a different way. Children expect to hear “sit still and listen” at school, but in these activities they were being guided to make something, share it with a neighbor, and then use the opportunity to spark a conversation. Because the class visited the residents several times over the year, the activities became more than just isolated exercises. Students began to look forward to the next meeting with our elderly neighbors.

Children and adults shared some funny moments at the residence. For example, one lady asked an attractive student, “Are you a girl or a boy?” After the student told her, she said, “Yes, of course. You are a nice looking young man!” Another resident offered a couple of students money for their gift. The students exchanged glances for a moment, then one replied, “Thank you, but of course we don’t want your money. It’s a gift!”

When asked what we could add to our plan for next year, students answered: “We could make them cookies!” “Send them letters like pen-pals twice every month!” “Make birthday cards!”

We concluded the year with constructing paper flowers, the same activity that started it all three years ago. But we—teachers and students—were already thinking of new ways to extend our involvement with these elderly neighbors of our. They have so much to offer. 📖

Victoria L. Gadecki is a National Board Certified sixth grade teacher at Lexington Intermediate School in Lexington, South Carolina.

Organizations and Resources on Working with Elders

NATIONAL ACADEMY FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING ABOUT AGING
Donna P. Couper and Fran Pratt, *Learning for Longer Life: A Guide to Aging Education for Developers of K-12 Curriculum and Instructional Materials* (2001. \$25.00, 135 pp.). Order from Kathy Dreyer, National Academy for Teaching and Learning about Aging, University of North Texas, PO Box 310919, Denton, TX 76203-0919. Phone: 940-565-3450. Fax: 940-565-3141. E-mail: kdreyer@scs.cmm.unt.edu. Website & catalog: www.unt.edu/natla

GENERATIONS TOGETHER

Jim M. McCrea, *Caring is the Key: Building a School-Based Intergenerational Service Program* (rev. 1993. #321. \$25.00. 126 pp), Order from Jim McCrea, Executive Director, Generations Together, University of Pittsburgh, 121 University Place, Suite 300. Pittsburgh, PA 15260. Phone 412-648-7150. Fax: 412-648-7446. E-mail: jmccrea@pitt.edu. Website & catalog: www.gt.pitt.edu.

----. *Talking with Children and Teens about Alzheimer’s Disease: A Question and Answer Guidebook for Parents, Teachers, and Caregivers* (1992. #138. \$12.50. 73 pp.). Order from Generations Together.

GENERATIONS UNITED

Young and Old Serving Together: Meeting Community Needs Through Intergenerational Partnerships. (rev. 2002. \$15.00, 76 pp.) Order from Sheri Steinig, Program Director, Generations United, 122 C Street, NW, Suite 820, Washington, DC 20001. Phone: 202-638-1263. Fax: 202-638-7555. E-mail: gu@gu.org. Website & catalog: www.gu.org.

Intergenerational Mentoring: A Unique Response to the Challenges of Youth and Benefits of Intergenerational Programs. Free fact sheets from Generations United, available at their website or by request.

OTHER MATERIALS

Wilson, Linda. *Grandpartners: Intergenerational Learning and Civic Renewal, K-6.* Portsmouth, NH Heinemann: 2001 (and resources listed within).

Alison Parker, “Visiting and Interviewing Older Adults: Service Learning in the Sixth Grade” *Middle Level Learning* 15 (September, 2002; insert to *Social Education*): 3-7.