

## Benefits of Intergenerational Programming

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### Abstract

*Said the little boy, "Sometimes I drop my spoon."  
 Said the old man, "I do that too."  
 The little boy whispered, "I wet my pants."  
 "I do that too," laughed the little old man.  
 Said the little boy, "I often cry."  
 The old man nodded, "So do I."  
 "But worst of all," said the boy, "it seems  
 Grown-ups don't pay attention to me."  
 And he felt the warmth of a wrinkled old hand.  
 "I know what you mean," said the little old man.*

- Shel Silverstein

Lamentable, but beautiful, this poem illustrates the strong connection that can be made between generations that are far apart chronologically. We have seen this again and again during our year at All Seasons Preschool, a school housed inside of a senior living building. When we embarked on this journey, we were aware of the research about the benefits of intergenerational relationships in broad, generic ways. Our intentions were good and our expectations were high, but they were distant, lofty and not yet tangible. This year we've seen in great and small, but most importantly in very personal ways, the benefits of the relationships that have developed between the young and old. Here, together, those distant and lofty goals transformed into very personal benefits for real people, many of them planned and expected, and many others surprising and unexpected. We witness the small miracles that occur on a daily basis and if we blink, we miss them.



Figure 1. Playing together

## The start of something new: Our program in year one at an intergenerational preschool

*We believe that the quality of life is enhanced  
when all generations live and work together.*

- All Seasons Preschool

I taught elementary school for eight years and wrote a grant for an intergenerational service learning project. This project that paired second graders with residents at a local nursing home won the Minnesota Governor's Youth Service Award. I also wrote a curriculum for intergenerational service learning as my final project for my Master's Degree.

While I was in college I often visited my grandfather at a nursing home and I noticed how seniors would come alive at the mere sight of a young child. People who were mostly unresponsive would brighten up, smile, talk and reach out to small children. During this same time, I had the pleasure of hearing two charismatic speakers passionately promote the pairing of children and seniors. From that time I hoped that when I became a teacher, I would pursue partnerships with seniors, which I did when I received the grant. I love teaching and working with children, but the highlight of my teaching years has been watching what the children and the seniors could do together, but not alone. This experience planted the seed for what became my long-term goal: to open an intergenerational site that paired two populations that benefit in so many ways simply from being together.



**Figure 2. Showing that we care for each other**

Our preschool is housed inside Inver Glen, a building for seniors who are independent, those who need some assistance, or those in memory care. Our plans to spend most of our senior time with the people in independent living quickly shifted when we discovered that most of that population was simply too busy for us, while our time with the people in memory care was magical. So it is important to note that most of our interactions with seniors occur in Willow Cove, which is the memory care unit. Additionally, we meet regularly with a handful of seniors in independent living for story time. The activities we do together include singing, table games, active games, rhythm band, cooking and reading. As a group, we refer to the seniors as "grandmas and grandpas," but when we are together, we call them by their first names.

The beauty of sharing one roof is that the two groups see each other every day, sometimes for scheduled activities, sometimes in passing. It is a real community where everybody knows your name. Because we see the same grandmas and grandpas daily, we have formed very close relationships. The familiarity the children and seniors demonstrate with each other is touching. Some of our students even visit seniors on the weekends with their families.

Since opening in October, we have embarked on one adventure after another with a focus on art, nature and intergenerational relationships. Spending time with the "grandmas and grandpas" upstairs has been most thrilling. We have eaten cookies, played games, done art projects, and made birthday cakes. Favorite activities have included painting pumpkins, eating birthday cake, singing our favorite songs (again and again), weekly cookies and story times, and rhythm band. It is touching that both groups embrace these simple pleasures with equal enthusiasm. The opportunities to be present, to savor the moment and to laugh are endless.

## Community

Under what conditions do children, families and communities flourish? Renowned psychologist and author, Mary Pipher, writes, "Many communities are realizing the value of projects that connect the young and old. Older people are often wiser and less stressed than the rest of us and they have time and patience." Seniors are not checking their watch, laptop or blackberry constantly. Young children need the wisdom and patience of the older generation and old people need the innocence and vitality that only a young child can offer.

Al, the grandpa who reads to the children every Friday, ducks through the little door to get into the playhouse, and even plays hide and seek when he comes said, "It is difficult to put into words how much I love the preschool children who come to Inver Glen. They are all polite and friendly and take part in so many activities with the seniors in Willow Cove. I feel very fortunate that I get to read to them each week." Al says his favorite things to do with the children are reading, singing and playing the drums.



**Figure 3. Reading session**

The research to support the benefits of intergenerational programming is strong and consistent. Long-term studies show lasting benefits to young and old who live and work together. Children who spend a significant amount of time with senior adults demonstrate improved vocabulary and advanced social skills, particularly in the areas of inclusiveness and empathy. In the older population, spending time with children alleviates boredom, loneliness, and helplessness.

The blessings we have experienced can all be attributed to one idea: community. It is amazing to see the power the children have in bringing out the very best in our grandmas and grandpas upstairs. Women who initially wouldn't participate in any other social activities came out of their rooms to spend time with the children. One man will cooperate for blood pressure checks or blood draws when the children are nearby. Another woman is consistently in a surly mood when we arrive for music and initially refuses to participate but can't take her eyes off the children and is laughing when we leave.

When two of our 'grandparents' got sick and temporarily went into a nursing home, visits from the children boosted their spirits for days. One eighty-eight year old grandpa can still duck down to fit through the playhouse door when he comes to read and never fails to find every child during hide and go seek. As the director of nursing told us, "Those kids are like an antidepressant for the seniors."

Anita Wills, mother of Samantha said, "As I watch my daughter greet various seniors in the hallway as we walk to her classroom in the morning, I notice the easy, casual manner of their brief conversations - simple and heartfelt. They're not awkward or even remotely forced the way adults conversations often are. The building feels as though it is filled with an extended family. I do believe that it takes a village to raise a child. I watch and, as I leave the building each morning, I am at peace knowing that we have made the right decision for our daughter. Our hearts are both full."



**Figure 4. Building together**

The presence of seniors allows the children to rise to their very best as well. Children who are incapable of moving at anything but full speed walk cautiously and quietly upstairs so as not to hurt the grandmas and grandpas. A little girl who is a wiggle worm will sit still for a ride on a grandma's walker. A boy whose main interest is pretending to blow things up can play Go Fish for thirty minutes with his favorite grandpa. Not only are the children on their best behavior during our organized time with seniors, they spontaneously run across the playground to shake hands with the grandmas and grandpas sitting outside on the patio or will greet Larry, our mailman, with eye contact and a handshake.

From the first interaction, we established the ritual of shaking hands and making eye contact each time we greet the grandmas and grandpas and say goodbye. We use names as much as possible. If the children are comfortable with it, they will hold a hand or sit on a lap. We have a real community "where everybody knows your name."

There are clear differences between the two populations. The children frequently notice and comment on features they find unusual.

The grandmas' and grandpas' fancy walkers and their large hands: "Dick has the biggest hands of anyone. He can hold five apples in one hand!".

"Their skin isn't smooth."

"They keep asking us the same questions." (And the children always respectfully reply with the same answers)

Almost all the grandmas and grandpas have white hair, and some can't see or hear well.

Despite obvious differences, when we are together the similarities are what stands out. At any age it takes skill and concentration to throw an apple into a barrel; it takes balance to stand on one foot to kick a soccer ball into the net; it takes a steady hand and the ability to bend to roll a bowling ball. Kneading bread dough is tiring when the muscles in your hands are weak and stiff from arthritis or are not fully developed due to immature muscles.



**Figure 5. Mutual absorption**

Remembering what the number three looks like in a game of Go Fish can be a challenge and may take time, but everyone understands. The capabilities that we take for granted do not come easily for preschoolers or for grandmas and grandpas. Both groups get frustrated, but can laugh at their unsuccessful attempts and celebrate the small victories. The first time Robert, one of the grandpas, was able to throw more than one apple into the barrel, it was hard to say who was happier, the children or Robert. Both groups find comfort and joy in

our familiar musical repertoire – some clap, some do hand motions, and when Harriet marches, all the preschoolers follow. If Grandma Harriet doesn't initiate the march, inevitably, one of the preschoolers will grab her hand and they take off down the hallway! Both groups embrace these simple pleasures with equal enthusiasm. The contentment and joy of simply being together is more important than the activity.

What we've learned along the way is that the relationships we establish must be authentic. Participation is voluntary, never mandatory. Community is a place where everyone belongs. Being present is everything.

### **What do we need?**

We live in a country that values independence. Our society considers "adult" synonymous with "independent." Being dependent implies weakness and neediness. Being dependent in our culture is shameful. So what happens in a dependent-phobic culture if you are one of the old needing help for basic things like going to the grocery store, cutting your grass, standing up or going to the bathroom? What do you do? Because you feel ashamed, you start to isolate yourself, you become depressed. Being a burden on others is the ultimate shame. Rather than be a burden, you become detached. Our society is too busy to be bothered with the very old. We can't afford to "waste" our valuable time caring for people who cannot care for themselves. We are not prepared to handle our rapidly increasing numbers of aging population in a way that is life-giving to people.

Many old people have lost their friends and loved ones; they have virtually no contact with anyone but other old people or their caregivers. In *Another Country, Navigating the Emotional Terrain of Our Elders*, Mary Pipher observes about visiting and interviewing people for her book.

I saw lots of suffering. I saw people waiting in rest homes for calls that didn't arrive and for birthday visits that didn't happen. I saw people facing surgery alone, eating institutional food on Thanksgiving, or weeping because they wanted to take a ride on a spring day to see some flowers. I saw old people scrambling to touch a baby, to get near a child, any child.

While we have elderly people who are terrified of being a burden, and we have young children starving for "lap time," nurturing, patience, schoolwork support and moral instruction from their elders. Old people often feel lonely and useless while their very own grandchildren are caring for electronic pets. The grandparents and grandchildren might live thousands of miles away from each other or even just a few miles away, yet neither group is getting the love and attention they desperately need.

When considering the needs of the very young and the very old, there are numerous overlaps. Looking back on my own memories of time spent with my grandparents, they are among the happiest of my childhood. Of course I didn't realize it at the time, but my grandparents gave me exactly what I needed; my grandparents had TIME for me, they had PATIENCE with me, they had FUN with me, they LISTENED to me, they TALKED to me. And looking back, I gave them these very same gifts in return even though I was just a young child. This is what I gave them before I became "too busy."

What do the old need? What do they want? They want the same things that our children want. All they want is our time. They want our time and they want to feel needed. Everyone here can provide that. That is what we do at All Seasons Preschool.

## **Favorite Stories**

***A recent exchange in Willow Cove, the memory care unit,*** between Robert, a senior, and Amy, a teacher

Amy: "Robert, you are so dressed up today! Where are you going?"

Robert: "I'm going to see the kids this morning."

Amy: "You look like you're dressed to go out to a fancy dinner."

Robert: "No, I'm going somewhere even more important – to see the kids."

***The day we made monster hands by stuffing candy corn and popcorn into plastic gloves:***

(This required tremendous fine motor planning and skill)

Sue (senior activities director): "Kids, we are not going to eat the candy today. We use the candy to stuff the gloves."

Sue: "We are not going to eat the candy. The candy is for the monster hands."

Sue: "This candy isn't for eating. It is only for our project."

The children did not eat the candy, but every time Sue turned her back, one of the grandpas ate the candy. None of us (children included) said a word.

***Playing color and shape BINGO:***

Robert (senior) to Rosalita (preschooler): "You got a purple circle. Cover it." When we get a match, we cover the space, rather than write on it.

Rosalita: "No, my circle is brown."

Robert: "No, it's a purple circle." Stops and laughs at his mistake in pronunciation.

Rosalita laughs too: "No, it's brown!"

Robert: "Cover your circle."

Rosalita: "No, that's cheating."

Robert: Leans over and covers Rosalita's brown circle.

Rosalita: Puts her hand on her forehead and looks up at the ceiling.

They both laugh.

***Using humor to deal with mistakes:***

Kenny (senior) is holding the bowl firmly so the tough dough can be stirred by Natalie (preschooler).

A big cloud of flour explodes in Kenny's face. His face and eyebrows are white. Everyone, including Kenny, laughs.

Natalie begins to cry, thinking she did something wrong and has difficulty recovering. Kenny continues to stir where Natalie left off, making jokes to help her feel better. After several minutes, Kenny flicks flour in his own face and says, "There, now I made a mess, too." Everyone laughs, even Natalie.



**Figure 6. Cooking together**

***An awakening for Patricia and for us***

Patricia (senior) had lost the ability to speak prior to her arrival in memory care. She regularly joined us for music and cooking, but her communication had been limited to a smile and a handshake. One day, after mixing and kneading our ingredients for bread, we took out the play dough to work those muscles that haven't gained strength, either because of youth or because of old age.

The children and the seniors were sitting together at tables, chatting, and playing with play dough. Suddenly, Patricia looked Kiera (preschooler) in the eyes, smiled and placed a beautiful little play dough girl on the table in front of her! It was Kiera! Imagine the power of that moment! After months of silence, Patricia was communicating with us. We have learned that Patricia is a retired art teacher! Since then Patricia has joined us in our preschool art studio every week and art is her language.

### **Simply being part of a real community**

The benefits to the entire community here at Inver Glen are apparent even amongst those seniors who do not participate in activities with the preschoolers. The members of the men's coffee club sit in the dining room each morning after breakfast. The dining room overlooks the playground and adjacent golf course. These men got into the habit of monitoring the comings and goings of the children, particularly during the winter months.

"Amy, you better tell the kids their snowman in the east corner is starting to melt."

"Amy, what were the children riding this morning over on the golf course?" (Kick sleds was the answer).

We have one grandpa upstairs, Dick, who is an avid golfer. Because we are next to a golf course, the children find stray balls out in the woods. Regularly, we put the balls in a basket and bring them to his apartment. The following week, Dick returns the basket filled with stuffed animals he has won for them at BINGO.



**Figure 7. Flowers for the preschool graduation**

This Friday, Kenny, one of our favorite grandpas, will turn ninety. By themselves, the children came up with the thoughtful idea of bringing flowers from their gardens at home, so Friday Kenny will receive a bouquet of flowers from several different gardens.

This morning a group of seniors was outside on the patio waiting for one of the activities to begin. Rather than being bored and restless, they were entertained by lively children a few feet away who were running through the sprinklers in bathing suits.

One special day in May, a preschooler and senior shared a birthday: one turned five, the other, one hundred! The birthday girls were partners in our beanbag toss.

Lois, one of our grandmas, comes to our preschool to recite poetry she has memorized, bringing us new books she has ordered, and reading stories she and her sister wrote decades ago. The preschoolers surprised Lois by making illustrations to go with one of her stories. She said this about having preschoolers here: "It keeps us all thinking young. It



**Figure 8. The Birthday Girls**

keeps my memory going, trying to recite old poems and stories for the kids. One of the most wonderful things I've ever seen is how those little kids interact with the folks in memory care."

### **Words of wisdom from those who know**

Here are some observations about our experiences together at All Seasons Preschool:

Sarah Sivright, a teacher and director with over twenty years of experience in early childhood said, "We need each other. We need them and they need us. These are real connections with real people."

When the children are with the seniors, they take someone else's needs into consideration; they do not run in the hallways, they are not noisy, they make eye contact and speak loudly and clearly.

Sue Hastings, the senior activities director said, "There have been very healing situations. One was a very lonely senior brought totally out of his shell by a very quiet little boy who took a liking to him. They are now great friends."

Tegwin Moyer, one of our children's parents, said of her daughter, "Stella is realizing more of what it means to be older and isn't afraid of seniors anymore like she used to be. Now she can relate to the seniors better and views them as grandparents and not scary wrinkled faces."

Kathryne Engel, another teacher at All Seasons said, "The children are learning naturally about the different stages of life. They are seeing people who look different from them every day. They're learning social skills they can use for the rest of their lives."

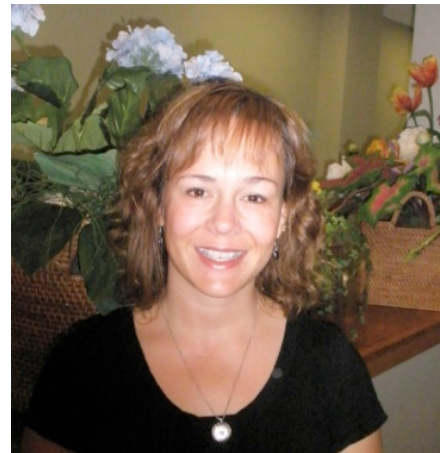
### **Looking forward**

Our preschool is still new and we have a lot of room to grow. During our first year at All Seasons, we had only eleven students, but next year we will have twenty. Some day we will grow to capacity, which is forty-eight. People tour our facility several times each month. Some of them are from other preschools, but because our population in this country is aging, most of our tours are developers who see a large demand for senior housing that's not far off the horizon. Developers respond with everything from, "Why would you pair preschoolers with seniors?" to "Why don't more people do this and would you be willing to help us pursue similar programming?" My sincere hope is that our society starts working smarter, not harder, at caring for both groups. It is a wonderful pairing of two groups of people who not only need the same things but can provide them for each other.

**Reference:**

Pipher, Mary. *Another Country, Navigating the Emotional Terrain of Our Elders*. New York, New York: 1999

**Amy Lemieux, MA** is the director at All Seasons Preschool, a nature and art-based preschool located inside a senior building. Her undergraduate degrees are in Psychology and Elementary Education from the University of St. Thomas and her Master's Degree is in Counseling from the University of Wisconsin, River Falls. Amy taught elementary school for eight years and at that time wrote a grant to do an intergenerational service learning project with her students and seniors at a local nursing home. This power of that experience many years ago was the inspiration for opening an intergenerational program at All Seasons Preschool.



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