



Journal photo by George C. Cassidy

Young and old surprise each other and discover they'll be

Forever friends

By LOIS BLINKHORN
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THEY said it couldn't be done, which slowed down Sherry Power for just about a New York second.

When she proposed bringing her second-grade students at Hillside Elementary School in Brookfield together with residents at St. John's Tower Apartments on Milwaukee's East Side, Power was met with a virtual blizzard of reasons for not doing it.

"They said St. John's was too far away, the people were too old, the kids were too young, and what if somebody dies," Power says.

9 YEARS AND STILL GOING

That was nine years ago and Power's program, called Forever Friends, has been going strong ever since. It hit a high point last month when prize-winning children's book illustrator Barbara Lavallee came from her home in Anchorage, Alaska, to Milwaukee to attend a joint exhibit of art by Hillside students and elders at St. John's. ("Elder" is Power's favorite word to describe the St. John's participants, who range in age from 70 to 95.)

But Forever Friends is more than just a one-shot sensation. It is an ongoing program that at its best builds genuine friendships between youngsters and elders, dissipating the ageism that runs both ways in our society.

The elders attend every class field trip with the children. They've been to the Milwaukee Art Museum, the Milwaukee Public Museum, plays, Children's Hospital, to an old-fashioned one-room schoolhouse, to lunch at St. John's and at McDonald's. You name it, they've been there. This month they will celebrate the holidays together with an evening program at Hillside.

A LIFT FOR THE ELDERS

In the course of these activities, the elders have learned that today's kids are still wonderful little human beings, despite the way the world has changed. And the kids have learned . . . well, let's let Power tell it:

"Before they meet their friends we ask them, 'What is old?' They use words like crabby, hearing aid, glasses, gray hair — all negatives. After one visit, we ask them again. They use words like friendly, gentle, knows a lot — all positives."

That's sweet. But does it really make a difference?

If you want to get bottom-line serious

about it, consider this:

"It's a global issue because, as the baby boomers age, we are a huge group," says Power. "In the 1970s, there were five workers for every one elder. Now the ratio is three to one. By the year 2000, it will be even. And by 2020 there will be five elders for every one worker. So although this is a wonderful, warm idea, it also is terribly necessary to educate these kids who will be making decisions about what's going to be done to and for the elders. If they aren't educated to understand the aging process, we're going to be in serious trouble."

Those concerns seem far away, however, when you get down to the real human beings who thrive on this program. Take young Emily Roach, who is 7, and her admiring elder friend Marge Mattlin, for example.

"It is one of the most satisfying experiences that anyone can have," says Mattlin. "It's so wonderful in that we learn about what the children of today are like and how they see things so differently than we did. It is so fulfilling in that it gives us great faith in the future. My Emily is a gem."

Today's approach to learning was an eye-opener for Mattlin.

"One of the things that impresses me the most is all the wonderful things they are experiencing," Mattlin says. "This art project — to hear them talking about Monet or Renoir or van Gogh. They will discuss these artists with us. I sit there and hear them and, my dear, when I was in the second grade . . . believe me. . . . They're going to remember Monet and van Gogh for as long as they live."

The elders enjoy meeting the parents of



Journal photo by Ned Vespa

SECOND-GRADE TEACHER Sherry Power says of her students: "We ask them, 'What is old?' They use words like crabby, hearing aid, glasses, gray hair — all negatives. After one visit, we ask them again. They use words like friendly, gentle, knows a lot — all positives." Top of page: St. John's resident Marge Mattlin with special visitor Emily Roach, 7.

their young friends, too.

"It does renew one's faith in the future," says Mattlin, a lifelong resident of Milwaukee. "We hear so much about parents who are not good parents. But it redeems your faith in the future to know there are parents who are doing such a good job with their kids. For some older people, all they know about life is what they read in the paper and see on the TV. I'm a firm believer that the good family feeling that people in Milwaukee brought with them from other countries is still there."

This is Mattlin's third year in Forever Friends. Last year, when Mattlin's young friend made her First Communion, Mattlin surprised her by attending the ceremony after checking it out with the girl's parents.

"When she saw me in church, she jumped up and down and was so excited," Mattlin

says. "We're going to be friends forever. I'll keep in touch with these little girls as long as I can."

As for Emily, she's happy as a clam with her new friend. After their first meeting, she wrote this: "I have a brand new friend at St. John's and her name is Miss Mattlin. She is very nice and I love her already. . . . It was a beautiful day!!!"

Power's enthusiasm for the program has moved her to help other schools get similar programs started. For her, it clearly is a labor of love.

"There is nothing better than working with kids and elders. It is the best of both worlds," Power says. When she talks about her program starting up in other schools, she sounds like a proud godmother: "That's what makes my soul sing!"