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'Friends' connects generations

Hillside program has become model for schools across the nation

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Suzanne Weber listened intently as Luke Balke and Justin Soell read books and pointed to the illustrations they had created during class at Hillside Elementary School.

Upon closer look, one could see the buttons with each boy's photo proudly displayed on her shirt.

"I'm a lucky grandma," she said.

Weber isn't actually related to the students, but they've been matched through an intergenerational project called Forever Friends that brings seniors from St. John's on the Lake retirement community together with Hillside second-grade students.

On Jan. 24, the friends met for a Chinese meal, and the seniors got to see the projects their little buddies had been working on in class.



Filling a void

Student Madison Maze showed her friend Betty O'Neill the book she wrote describing her greatest treasure based on a Chinese folktale they read in class.

"My first one is my baby blanket," Madison said. "Then I have my family, stuffed dog and my Forever Friend."

Madison's grandparents live in Texas, so she doesn't get to see them often. Spending time with

O'Neill helps fill the void.

On a previous visit, the Forever Friends toured a one-room school house. O'Neill shared her childhood experiences and wrote an essay on what life was like when she was young.

O'Neill has participated in the Forever Friends program for six years and keeps in touch through cards and letters with many of her past pals.

"Being with children keeps you young. It makes a difference," she said.

Wisdom and experience

Victoria Stone heard about the program from her neighbor who participated. She was matched with students Meredith Bowar and Mitchell Selas.

Meredith was excited to learn that her friend had actually walked along the Great Wall of China, one of the topics the class had learned about during a Social Studies unit on the country.

"These people have so much wisdom and experience to share," said teacher Sherry Power, founder of the Forever Friends program. "When we get together, every one of these kids has their own tutors."

Power calls her mother the inspiration for the program. The neighborhood kids always enjoyed spending time with her and vice versa.

"I thought, everyone should have my mom around," she said.

However, there were very few retirement facilities in the Elmbrook area, she explained. So Power partnered with St. John's on the Lake for a summer enrichment program.

Field trips together

Eventually, she brought it into the classroom and invited the seniors to accompany Hillside's grade two on its field trips, school concerts and other activities. They also write letters - and e-mails for those who use it - back and forth.

"(The program) became so popular, so fast that I was asked to speak at different seminars and conferences," Power said.

PBS and the Children's Hospital Foundation created a documentary on the Hillside program, which continues to air. The publicity has led schools around the country to form Forever Friends programs.

Power hopes the programs will familiarize youth with the baby boomers of their community, so when they are called upon to care for the elderly they can approach it with compassion and

respect.

"I want them to embrace it as a duty and an honor," she said. "You can't love what you don't know."

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BY THE NUMBERS

20

years since the inception of the Forever Friends program across the nation

2

students per senior

13

friends with whom one senior keeps in touch

21

students in the class

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