



ALLEN FREDRICKSON FOR JOURNAL SENTINEL

Marion Smith helps Calli Copoulos, 7, finish decorating her gingerbread house at Hillside Elementary School in Brookfield. They were participating in Forever Friends, which gets children in Sherry Power's second-grade class together with senior citizens from St. John's Tower.

# Generations apart, inching together

## Friends program pairs Brookfield pupils with senior citizens

By BRET CRAMER  
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Brookfield — In the main hallway of Hillside School in Brookfield, two friends are exchanging news.

"Did you have a good Thanksgiving?" Marge asks her friend Amy, giving her a big hug.

"Yes," Amy replies, "but I had the flu."

The two chat as though they've known each other for decades. But the term "decades" better describes the difference in their ages.

—Amy Kroll, of Brookfield, is

a second-grader at Hillside. Marge Matlin lives in St. John's Tower, an apartment complex for senior citizens 65 and older.

The two met as a result of a program called Forever Friends, which pairs up the children in Sherry Power's second-grade class with senior citizens from St. John's for activities throughout the school

year. Last Thursday, the seniors visited Power's class to make gingerbread houses out of milk cartons decorated with candy and frosting.

Power started the program 10 years ago as a complement to a unit on aging that she includes in her curriculum.

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## Friends/ Kids, elderly get together

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"The philosophy behind an intergenerational program is based on the fact that our children and our elderly are often kept separate," Power said.

"This gives the children an opportunity to learn from the wisdom and experience of people whom they might otherwise never get to know."

Around the room are pictures that each of the children drew of themselves and their own friend from St. John's.

At the beginning of the year, Power asks the children what they think of when they hear the word "old."

"I get all the negatives," Power said. "Sick, gray, tired, uses a cane, but then when they come back from meeting their friend for the first time, I ask them what they think of the person and I get things like 'funny,' 'happy,' 'tells good stories.' Children have a lot of misconceptions about what 'old' is."

### Spontaneous Friendships

When the pupils and senior citizens meet each year, Power has the seniors sit at tables with an empty chair next to each person. When the children come in they randomly choose a seat and whoever is on their left becomes their friend for the school year.

Calli Copoulos, a pupil, explained how she happened to find her friend, Marion Smith.

"I just saw an empty chair and she looked like a very nice person," Calli said.

When asked if her intuition was correct, Calli smiled broadly and giggled, "Yep! And I sat next to her."

Smith and Calli were among the most talkative in the room.

"Every guide I've ever read about this says to be careful



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Clarence Reible looks on as Katie Crabb, 7, puts the finishing touches on two gingerbread houses.

how you match the students with the elders," Power said. "This spontaneity has worked way better, I think."

### Drawing Children Out

Parents have attested to the fact that some of their children were drawn out of their shell by having a friend from St. John's.

Bridget Gaughan, whose son is an alumnus of Power's program, said the boy wasn't a "real open child, but he does talk openly about (his friend) Mrs. Hiatt."

The oldest friend ever to participate in the program, Power said, was Eleanor McGowen, who was 100 years old.

Power said that three times

a senior friend passed away before the end of the school year, but she prepared the children for that possibility.

"We explain to the children that everything has a beginning and an ending," Power said. "Sometimes old people die, but we always have memories."

"The thing we need to realize," Power said, "is that we baby boomers are the largest segment of the population now, and when we get old these children are the ones who will be making all of our decisions about medical ethics and Social Security. We need to educate them about that segment of the population or we may have to answer for it later."