



RYAN BERGAUER, 9, explains his artwork "Dawn Delight" (bottom) to his senior friend, Caroline Chapman, on Sunday at the Uihlein Peters Gallery, at St. John's Home, 1840 N. Prospect Ave. Journal photo by Karen A. Sherlock

Friendship program spans the ages

Elmbrook schoolchildren and retirement center residents have a magic rapport

By DAVE STEWART
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The works of 106 young artists hung from the walls of the Uihlein Peters Gallery, but most prominently on display at a reception was the art of love and friendship between children and senior citizens. There was Nora Pludeman, 9, working her way politely and quietly through the crowd that filled the gallery hallways Sunday at St. John's Tower in Milwaukee. She spotted her friend Margaret Bakke, 84, and rushed toward her with a smile

and a generous hug. There was effervescent Annie Massaro, 9, happily explaining the significance of her friend Caroline Chapman, 87, being the mother of only boys: "I was her first girl." There was Walter Wolf, 89, one of the oldest and most active male residents of St. John's, mingling with children and parents with enthusiastic greetings and non-stop conversation. And there was second grade teacher Sherry Power, a bundle of energy, sharing hugs and smiles with everybody, young and old. Power is the founder of the 5-year-old Forever Friends program which, on a regular basis, brings together St. John's Tower residents and children in her classes at Hillside Elementary School in the

Elmbrook School District. St. John's is a retirement center at 1840 N. Prospect Ave. "They should make her teacher of the year for the things she does," said Bakke, in one of the innumerable spontaneous testimonials offered to Power and the Forever Friends program. **THE PERFECT MIX** Children at the beginning of the school year select their St. John's friends at a mixer. By a wondrous combination of magic, chemistry and childhood instinct, most of the matches seem to be ideal, participants say. Please see **Children** page C

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Children/Show displays art of love

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Some of the St. John's residents, like Wolf, who have been in the program from the beginning, now have five young friends. Power's students and the senior citizens, all active members of St. John's independent living section, have spent many hours together on field trips to the zoo, art museum, history museum and Boerner Botanical Gardens and at elaborate theme parties at the school in Brookfield or at the retirement home. "What a kick the children get out of coming here," said Louise Ellerd, 77, who fondly recalls the precocious delight that one of her new young friends was. "She particularly likes the wheelchairs. She said she thought it would be fun to do wheelies on. You just don't expect this."

KEEPING IN TOUCH

Most of the randomly matched pairs stay in touch with letters, phone calls and dinners. As the name of the program suggests, many remain friends after the children have left Power's class. "They will contact you one way or another," said Chapman, who counts herself among the program's most enthusiastic backers.

The reception at the art gallery brought together for the first time all of the children in the program over the past five years with their senior friends. Helen Uihlein Peters, a St. John's resident who donated the money with which the gallery was constructed, was also in attendance. All 106 children displayed one or more pieces of art. Annie Massaro's water color still life of a vase of flowers was painted for Mother's Day. Nora Pludeman said with a smile that her relationship with an older brother inspired the title of her painting of a tree house: "No Boys Allowed." The show includes colorful clown constructions, paintings of sunset and dawn in the style of Monet, Indian necklaces, baskets and beadwork. **PROGRAM LIVES ON** The art show closes Friday, but Forever Friends will continue. "There is truly magic," Power said. "It is the most wonderful experience I have ever had in 23 years of teaching. I love teaching — I always have — but in the last five years there is this richness in connecting these two groups.

"The seniors have warmth and wisdom and experience. Children have the energy and enthusiasm and freshness. They really pull together everything that's important in life. "When you see them together and see the light in their eyes — whether they're 94 or 7 — it's the same light." Power came upon the idea as she was developing an enrichment program for the Elmbrook School District several years ago. "I wanted to do a unit on the elderly," she said. "I always felt strongly that they're not included the way they should be." Power was put in touch with Joyce Thorson, the activities director at St. John's. They agreed that they wanted to develop a program that cultivated genuine friendships. Power says she includes get-togethers with the seniors in her second-grade curriculum. "All these older people have been so active all their lives. They have a love of living and a love of learning and they just take it and share it with the children," she said. "No matter what we're studying at school, they can enrich it for these kids."