

Pupils take lessons from older generation

Elmbrook teacher uses interaction with elderly to go beyond classroom

By LUKE KLINK

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Brookfield — Some Hillside Elementary School second-graders and selected residents of an assisted-living center are learning from one another that age really does not have to matter.

Launched 13 years ago by second-grade teacher Sherry Power, "Forever Friends" has brought her pupils and older people together to share experiences and tear down negative stereotypes.

"I feel it is very important that these kids have their myths of the elderly kind of knocked out of the ballpark," Power said.

Near the start of every school year, Power lists what her pupils say about the elderly. Remarks usually include unflattering descriptions such as "false teeth" or "wears funny hats."

Later in the year, Power again asks the same question. The revised list usually includes more complementary descriptions such as "great storyteller" or "fun to be with."

Power's pupils meet the older people near the start of every school year during a field trip to St. John's Towers, a complex on the east side of Milwaukee providing independent living, assisted living and skilled care to the elderly.

The children and the older people are paired at random

but are quick to make friends, according to Power. Both take field trips together to destinations such as the Milwaukee County Museum, a one-room schoolhouse in West Bend and a hospital.

Also, the older people take part in the school's winter and spring holiday programs with the pupils.

"All the things we do fit into our second-grade program. This is not an extra. It is an inclusion," Power said. "This gives children another opportunity to share some of the things they might be learning. It is a controlled learning program where children are learning from the elders about what they have done in their long lives and where the elderly are learning from the children about what education is like today."

Durelle Chopp, curriculum coordinator for the Elmbrook School District, said "Forever Friends" fits nicely into the second-grade curriculum by providing meaningful activities for pupils such as letter writing and geography studies.

One older person who lived in Africa during part her life teaches pupils about that country. Pupils also have helped

teach their "Forever Friends" how to use computers.

After studying Africa, pupils and their older friends ate banana splits in the classroom. Because vanilla beans, cocoa beans, cashews and bananas grow in Africa, Power thought it would be another way of bringing the two generations together and to teach about the continent.

"I like being with the elders because it's fun to be with them and they have taught me a lot," said second-grade pupil Jacqueline Santulli.

Second-grader Kathryn Nickel said "Forever Friends" has helped her get to know the elderly better.

"They're nice and they really enjoy being with us and learning about the things we are doing," Kathryn said. "They teach us about the older days when they went to school and the things they did when they were kids."

St. John's Tower resident Lois Olsen, 73, said she has made many young friends during her five years in the program.

"I've thoroughly enjoyed this and I have had delightful opportunities to meet some nice children," Olsen said. "They seem to enjoy the fellowship with adults and they may gain new concepts about what older adults are like."

Pat Barger, activity coordinator at St. John's Tower, said the children develop new opinions of the elderly.

"They get a whole new idea of what older people are like. The children grow up quite a bit when they see how vibrant the elders really are," Barger said.

Power said she saw a need for "Forever Friends" based on her own childhood memories about her grandmother.

"I saw the friends she made with the kids who were going to and from school when she was in her 80s. She was always interested in what the kids were doing," Power said.

Power said the only contact suburban children typically have with the elderly occurs when they travel to visit their grandparents, who sometimes live in retirement homes or senior apartments.

"How we prepare them now for caring for the elderly is going to have a tremendous impact on the process they use to make decisions that will impact us when we will be the elderly," Power said. It is important "for them to understand that our elders are active, valuable, contributing members of our society. I want to dispel the myths children have about our elders."

Marion Smith, 85, said she still mails Christmas, birthday

and Valentine's Day cards to some children she has met during her 10 years in "Forever Friends."

"The kids are fun and inspirational and it's good to know people of different ages. The more friends you have, the better," she said.

To teach pupils about why the elderly pass away, Power has children write letters or discuss their worries. When one of the older participants in the program dies, pupils have attended memorial services and written special stories for eulogies.

"Some people were worried about elementary students ex-

periencing death, but something like this really prepares them for loss of a loved one in the future," Power said.

Power has earned a certificate in bereavement facilitation from the Academy of Bereavement in Arizona. She also teaches courses called "Bereavement Issues in the Classroom" and "Classroom Communities — Bringing Young and Old Together" for Marian College in West Allis. She has a master's degree in education with an emphasis in intergenerational programming from Cardinal Stritch University.