

# "THESE GUYS ARE FUN!"

**R**etired Boeing engineer Wylie Smith guides a 5th grader's hands in the careful process of cutting small planks with a rotary saw.

"That's it, give it a tug," Smith encourages Josh with a slow, patient voice that belies his red-ened face and sweat-stained shirt. "I'll be right with you, Heather," he calls to another youngster participating in the after-school program at Hesston Middle School in Hesston, Kan.

A few feet away, Harold Schmidt, 82, a retired farmer, teacher and coach, helps 6th grader Tyrone hammer nails into a wooden birdhouse. Other children flit around the room, sanding, drilling and shaping their creations during the Middle School Intergenerational Project run by a group called the Hesston Area Seniors, Inc.

"The very first time I came here, I thought it would smell like the Villa [a local nursing home]," Josh says, acknowledging the stereotypical image many children have of older persons: that they're slow, sick and — well, stinky. Instead, Josh discovered that taking part in the enrichment sessions not only beats the alternative — watching television until his father comes home from work — but that the older people who run it are "pretty cool" after all.

"These guys are fun," Josh says with a sheepish grin. "They really help you."

A 1995 study by the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) found that young children typically perceive older adults as disabled, isolated, ugly and sad, and that these attitudes become more entrenched as children reach the middle grades. Existing right alongside these negative images are the labels older people sometimes apply to youth: immature, lazy, irresponsible and disrespectful.



## SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY PROGRAMS FOSTER FRIENDSHIPS ACROSS THE GENERATIONS

BY  
HOLLY HOLLAND

PHOTOGRAPHY BY  
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Second graders in Sherry Power's class at Hillside Elementary School in Brookfield, Wis., welcome their "Forever Friends" from a retirement center in Milwaukee.

After working together to recreate paintings by famous artists, the children and older adults proudly display their masterpieces.

For his part, Wylie Smith acknowledges that some children can be rowdy, rude and a little reckless around tools. But he also knows from experience that they respond well when adults take time to teach them more appropriate behaviors.

"I'm a firm believer that we've got to work with kids to help them grow up," says Smith, who is 72. "Nowadays, parents' responsibilities are so large they don't have time. Somebody's got to lead these kids. You've got to fill in."

Anthropologists and common wisdom have long recognized the educational and social benefits of close contact between the generations. Recent demographic trends have given the issue a new urgency. The rise of both single-parent and dual-career households is changing the norms of parent-child interaction. And, for many families, relocation often limits children's opportunities to build relationships with grandparents or other older kin.

This age segregation also makes it difficult for

## IN FOCUS

### *Friends for Life*

For the past 14 years, Sherry Power, a teacher at Hillside Elementary School in Brookfield, Wis., has integrated an intergenerational program she calls "Forever Friends" into her 2nd grade curriculum. Early in the school year, she introduces the children in her class to residents of St. John's Tower, a retirement center in Milwaukee, about 20 miles away. For the rest of the year, including summer break, a lively exchange takes place between the children and the older adults they have chosen as their friends.

The elders visit the school throughout the year, participating firsthand in the students' studies and activities. They share oral histories, favorite memories and stories, and introduce the children to their talents and hobbies, such as photography, playing musical instruments, and collecting coins and model trains.

To encourage her students to think about age issues, Power leads a discussion on the question "What is old?" To prompt further dialogue, she uses an attitude survey she devised about perceptions of older people. The survey includes simple questions such as "Are old people strong?"; "Are they sick a lot?"; "Do they like to have fun?" Then she introduces children's books such as *Miss Tizzy*, *Song and Dance Man* and other non-ageist literature (see *Resources*).

Power incorporates the intergenerational theme into many aspects of her classroom curriculum. For instance, she uses math to dispel myths about older adults. Working in small groups, the children are given buttons and asked to guess the number of people in the U.S. over

age 65 who live in nursing homes. Most groups estimate 80 or 90 out of 100 people. A more accurate count is 5.

Several other joint activities during the year strengthen relationships between the older and younger friends:

- Together, they attend plays and visit the children's hospital and art and science museums. One field trip the children especially enjoy is touring a restored one-room schoolhouse and hearing the elders describe what it was like to attend one.
- Students become teachers when they invite their senior pals to the classroom to see paintings they created based on the work of Monet, da Vinci, Michelangelo and Georgia O'Keeffe, all of whose careers continued into their 80s and 90s. After the children describe the artists and their artwork, they invite the seniors to render their own interpretations of the paintings.
- At the end of the year, the children put on a musical review for their parents and older friends that incorporates original poetry, songs and a play. At the end of the program, the seniors join the children on stage and perform four tunes, including "Forever Friends," which Power wrote especially for the group.

Power says that fostering relationships between her students and older people has added a special richness to her teaching experience. "The seniors have warmth and wisdom and experience. Children have the energy and enthusiasm and freshness. They bring together everything that's important in life."

— HOLLY HOLLAND



families to preserve their common heritage, pass on collected wisdom and share the responsibility of caring for their oldest and youngest members. At the same time, increased longevity — census figures show that Americans 85 and older comprise the country's fastest-growing age group — means that older adults' growing demand for medical care and other social services often collides with the youngest citizens' need for better schools, health care and recreation.

Unless these groups find common ground, their competing interests could jeopardize the

Aging, several studies demonstrate the positive impact of intergenerational relationships on both children and older persons. In one, developmental psychologist Emmy E. Werner followed 500 Hawaiian children from birth to adulthood and found that the ones who managed to "make it" — despite growing up in poverty — "could count on the support of a caring adult other than their parents."

A 10-year study on successful aging by the MacArthur Foundation found that older Americans who stayed productive and maintained

**"IT FELT NEAT. I WAS THE TEACHER. USUALLY IT'S THE OTHER WAY AROUND."**

prospects for both. The nation's schools, as one of the country's largest social institutions, are perhaps the most promising agencies for buffering this clash by connecting youth and older adults.

#### **Needing Each Other**

As reported in the Winter 1998-99 issue of *Generations*, the journal of the American Society on

strong social networks had the best physical and mental health in later life. The *Generations* article — which points out that retirement typically frees up 18 hours a week for men and 24 hours a week for women — also described how a concentrated effort to involve older adults in the Miami, Fla., public schools smoothed the way for passage of the biggest education bond issue in the community's history.



The success of such programs in closing the generation gap depends on the commitment that participants have for truly meaningful interaction between the two age groups. For example, it's common practice in many schools for teachers to steer service-learning projects toward nursing homes. Students visit a nearby center, take along some homemade greeting cards, play bingo with the residents and, perhaps, sing some songs. The trip promotes friendly interactions and a welcome break from the routine for both groups.

person together and something magical will happen that will work, no matter what. That's not true," says Donna Couper, director of national initiatives for the National Academy for Teaching and Learning About Aging. "We take the position that aging has become a multicultural issue because people of different ages have different languages, customs and worldviews."

Textbook publishers don't help much, Couper notes. They rarely include information about biological changes after adolescence, for instance. They don't use multigenerational examples in

## "OLD PEOPLE DON'T WANT TO BE BOXED UP AND PUT ON A SHELF."

But when the youngsters return to school from such a visit, they often carry with them a distorted view of older Americans — that they're confused and helpless and that the most important part of their lives is in the past. At the same time, the typical encounter provides little opportunity for older adults to understand what today's children are learning in school — or why.

"It's like you put a young person and an older

math problems, represent older performers in music and humanities textbooks or picture elderly people using computer equipment. And in literature for young readers, many authors refer to older persons as feeble or angry individuals who should be pitied or feared by everyone else.

"It's incredibly ageist, and for young people it only increases fears down the road of what will happen to them as they age," Couper says. "We've

done so much on other diversity issues, but we're not addressing this."

### Count Me In

It would be easy in a town like Hesston, in central Kansas, for residents to delude themselves into thinking they had escaped the problems of modern society. The community of 3,000 has more friends than strangers. The public schools enjoy a reputation for quality, and a Mennonite college ensures a steady population of educated and well-traveled adults. But as Hesston's civic leaders recognize, sometimes the worst problems in a community stem from the limitations imposed from within. Without strong alliances between people of different ages and

backgrounds, alienation and apathy can seep in, no matter how small the town.

A few years ago, Evelyn Rouner, a local activist and retired professor of human growth and development, became concerned that many of the town's older adults seemed to be withering from inactivity. She began organizing meetings with educators, government officials, PTA groups and seniors. Soon Rouner had spearheaded a grassroots, intergenerational movement that evolved into the Hesston Area Seniors, who chose as their motto "Unity Through Community."

In addition to running the after-school intergenerational program at Hesston Middle School that includes the woodworking class, the 300-member group — with Rouner, 78, still playing a

## ACTIVITY

### *Growing Up and Growing Older*

Help students confront ageism by exploring stereotypes about older and younger people. This exercise also illustrates that the two groups share some of the same life challenges.

• Each of the following statements expresses a stereotype about a group of people defined only as "they." Beside each number, indicate whether you think a young person is talking about older people (**OP**) or an older person is talking about young people (**YP**).

- \_\_\_ 1. They always stick together and keep their distance from other age groups.
- \_\_\_ 2. I hate the way they drive. They're a menace on the road.
- \_\_\_ 3. They're always taking and never giving. They think the world owes them a living.
- \_\_\_ 4. They're so opinionated. They think they know it all.
- \_\_\_ 5. They're never satisfied, always complaining about something.
- \_\_\_ 6. Don't hire them because you can't depend on them.
- \_\_\_ 7. They always hang around the parks and shopping malls.
- \_\_\_ 8. They're always so forgetful.
- \_\_\_ 9. I wish I had as much freedom as they have.
- \_\_\_ 10. They should act their age.

• **Small-Group Discussion:** Which of the above statements represent common stereotypes of young people? Of older people? Of both?

• **Class Discussion:** As a teenager, have you ever experienced or known anyone who experienced prejudice or discrimination based on age? (Possible occasions are when applying for a job, renting an apartment, or trying to participate in an activity intended for another age group.)

Both younger and older people can be the victims of prejudice and discrimination based on age. In what other ways is *growing up* similar to *growing old*?

What can be done about age-based prejudice and discrimination? How might older and younger people work together on this problem?

*Adapted from the National Academy for Teaching and Learning about Aging (NATLA) Web site: [www.unt.edu/natla](http://www.unt.edu/natla).*

pivotal role — tutors elementary and middle school students in reading and provides traffic guards for the town's three schools. Other achievements include building a \$200,000 senior center, hosting a monthly community breakfast and helping teenagers raise \$900 for a social club.

"We really want to dispel the notion that old people are closed off from the community," says Carolyn Holmes, the group's president. "We have a lot to offer. We don't want to be boxed up and put on a shelf."

Barbara Randel, principal of Hesston Middle School, is another strong believer that "it takes all of us to make a difference." Three years ago, she started a new venture when she arranged for some of her students to teach parents and senior citizens to use the school's computers. Michael Mercado and Josh Campo, both 8th graders at the time, admit they had reservations when Randel asked them to work with the seniors. Because Michael's grandfather and Josh's mother both had resisted learning about computers, the two boys thought all older people were "afraid" of technology. Instead, they found a group of enthusiastic adults who quickly shattered that stereotype.

"They're fast learners," says Josh, now a sopho-

more at Hesston High School. "It felt neat. I was the teacher. Usually it's the other way around."

### May I Have This Dance?

"You know, you hear all these things about this wild-eyed teenage generation, but when these kids walk in, it's a peaceable kingdom. These young people are fun."

This observation by Sid Sorkin, a retired school administrator in Illinois, reflects the success of a community service project that brought a new definition to "junior-senior prom." Eight years ago, Township High School District 211 in Arlington Heights, Ill., hired Maureen Statland as its intergenerational coordinator for community education and adopted a program she conducted that pairs teenage volunteers with older adults who need minor home repairs. Soon she was involving district students in an intergenerational film festival held in Chicago each spring and working to persuade more teachers to blend age issues into the curriculum.

By all accounts, Statland's most successful initiative has been expanding a senior citizens dance into the intergenerational prom. Before she took over, the students' only involvement was to provide the decorations and entertainment for the

## RESOURCES

### Power's Picks

Teacher Sherry Power (see "In Focus") cites the following as some of her favorite intergenerational children's books:

Neighborhood children love *Miss Tizzy* (\$5.99) and all the fun she shares with them. Roller-skating, cookie baking, parades and paintings for "people who have stopped smiling" are some of the adventures in this heartwarming story.

Simon and Schuster  
100 Front St.  
Riverside, NJ 08075  
(800) 223-2336

*The Song and Dance Man* (\$6.99) is a former vaudeville performer who entertains his grandchildren by putting on a show in the attic. This lively

portrait of an active elder will enchant children.

Random House  
400 Hahn Rd.  
Westminster, MD 21157  
(800) 726-0600

In *Mrs. Katz and Tush* (\$6.99), a warm friendship develops between a young African American boy, Larnel, and an older Jewish woman, Mrs. Katz, as they care for a kitten named Tush.

Dell Books  
2451 S. Wolf Rd.  
Des Plaines, IL 60018  
(800) 323-9872

### And More Gems ...

A 1999 release that's sure to become a classic is *Mei-Mei Loves the Morning* (\$15.95). This tender story portrays a young girl in China whose favorite way

to start the day is exploring the city with Grandpa on his bike.

Albert Whitman & Co.  
6340 Oakton St.  
Morton Grove, IL 60053-2723  
(800) 255-7675

Other classic children's books that promote positive images of older adults include *Abuela* (Dutton); *Grandma's Promise* (Lothrop, Lee & Shepard); *Miss Rumphius* (Viking); *My Great-Aunt Arizona* (HarperCollins); and *Amazing Grace* (Dial).

### Organizations

The following organizations offer a variety of programs, publications and other resources that address aging. Check out their Web sites for curriculum ideas and activities.

seniors' dance. Now the youth and elders participate as both co-planners and dancing partners.

Bryan Kosarek acknowledged being less than enthusiastic the first year one of his friends suggested that he participate in the dance. As an active volunteer in his community, Bryan routinely helped older persons fix up their property, taught them to use computers and visited them in nursing homes. But dancing with septuagenarians?

Despite his misgivings, 18-year-old Bryan decided to attend. And by the end of the evening, he had gained not only a deeper appreciation of older adults but a new level of understanding about his own place in the world.

"I didn't plan it, but I went and I had a blast," he says. "The seniors taught us dances like the jitterbug, the waltz and the swing. And we taught them — well — mostly moves. We don't have names for our dances."

The experience so inspired Bryan that he signed up for dance lessons to practice the swing and joined the intergenerational planning committee for the next prom. He also videotaped a series of interviews with his grandparents to preserve his family history.

"To hear their stories and know what they went through makes you look at that generation in a

new way," Bryan reflects. "It makes me feel bad that in the next 20 or 30 years that history will be lost. It's an era that I never really knew about. It's like, somehow these seniors just got here. You think they're slow drivers, not about the role they took in changing our society."

On the other side of this win-win partnership, the older adults who've planned and attended the intergenerational proms say they've been enlightened and energized by the high school students. Emily and Joseph Oskin, retired shopkeepers from Elk Grove Village, have no grandchildren of their own. So when Maureen Statland asked them to help plan the prom a few years ago, they decided it was a good way to bring young people into their lives. Joseph, who missed his high school prom because of serving in World War II, was named prom king at the first intergenerational event they attended.

"Each year we keep volunteering because we enjoy it so much," Emily Oskin says. "We hear so much on radio, television and the news about the troubles young people seem to have. You don't hear too much of the good children — and there are plenty of them, we found out." ●

*Holly Holland, a writer and editor based in Louisville, Ky, is the author of Making Change: Three Educators Join the Battle for Better Schools (Heinemann).*

In addition to *Generations* magazine, the American Society on Aging (ASA) publishes *Diversity Currents*, a quarterly newsletter of the group's Multicultural Aging Network.

ASA  
833 Market St., Suite 511  
San Francisco, CA 94103-1824  
(415) 974-9600  
[www.asaging.org](http://www.asaging.org)

The National Academy for Teaching and Learning about Aging (NATLA) promotes education about aging-related issues in teacher preparation programs and K-12 schools. Their extensive list of publications includes the annotated *Non-Ageist Children's Bibliography* (\$5), the *Learning for Longer Life* guide for curriculum developers (\$25) and other materials.

NATLA  
University of North Texas  
P.O. Box 310919  
Denton, TX 76203-0919  
(940) 565-3450  
[www.unt.edu/natla](http://www.unt.edu/natla)

In conjunction with NATLA, the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) distributes the free curriculum *Teaching About Aging: Enriching Lives Across the Life Span*. (Grades K-12; ask for Stock #D16481)

AARP  
601 E St. N.W.  
Washington, DC 20049  
(202) 434-2277  
[www.aarp.org](http://www.aarp.org)

Temple University's Center for Intergenerational Learning (C.I.L.) fosters cross-age cooperation through

programs such as the Full Circle Theater, an ensemble of teens and elders who explore contemporary issues affecting both groups. Printed resources are also available.

C.I.L.  
1601 N. Broad St., Room 206  
Philadelphia, PA 19122  
(215) 204-6970  
[www.temple.edu/CIL](http://www.temple.edu/CIL)

Generations Together works to promote aging as a "positive force in society" and offers resources on intergenerational studies, including early childhood curriculums.

Generations Together  
University of Pittsburgh  
121 University Place  
Suite 300  
Pittsburgh, PA 15260-5907  
(412) 648-2209  
[www.pitt.edu/~gti](http://www.pitt.edu/~gti)