

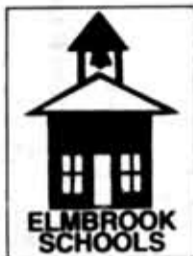
# Two generations explore the world

## Kids and seniors are now 'Forever Friends'

By Lee Raynor  
Staff Writer

To an unobservant eye, the quiet-as-a-mouse visitors at West Allis Memorial Hospital looked like any other tour group. The single distinguishing feature was the large number of adult chaperons.

Few people knew they were watching a little bit of magic. Young and old were melding that day — merging in their awe of a newborn, their curiosity about the human body, their wonder at life.



Second-graders in Sherry Powers' class at Hillside Elementary School and their elder friends from St. John's Tower in Milwaukee spent another day together last week. They met at the hospital to learn a little more about getting well and a lot more about each other.

The kids and senior citizens met at the beginning of the school year to become Powers' ninth group of Forever Friends. Powers connects her students with St. John's residents and, together, the youngsters and the oldsters frequently form relationships that last for years.

Each child is paired with an elder between 65 and 93 years old. Students and seniors meet monthly throughout the year. Sometimes, the kids go to St. John's. Often, the adults visit Hillside. As a special treat, the kids and their older friends will take a field trip like the one last week to West Allis Memorial.

"Everywhere we go, the St. John's crowd is explaining to the kids and bringing in their experience, and giving an extra little bit of information as the kids are learning all these other things," said Powers, a 24-year Elmbrook teaching veteran.

### Badges of friendship

At the beginning of the year, Powers takes a picture of each child with his or her friend. The pictures are made into buttons and are worn every time the two groups get together. At first, the buttons are identification badges, memory nudgers to help child and adult find each other. Later, the pins become treasured symbols of friendship.

Kids and their older buddies explored

nooks and crannies at West Allis that aren't often seen by the general public. But the story was not their tour as much as their relationships with each other.

High-spirited 7- and 8-year-olds are by nature relentless explorers. Their fascination with bandages and ambulances and hypodermic needles was boundless but their eagerness to share this new experience with their older friends was also clear.

Gray heads bent to the levels of young blond and brown and red heads as each whispered their reactions to a new sight or sensation. Soft, tiny hands crept into gnarled, spotted hands for a quick squeeze or a moment of silent reassurance. Smiles spoke a language unimpeded by hearing difficulties.

Powers' program is an outgrowth of the love and respect she saw between her aging mother and neighborhood children. Many of her students had almost no contact with elders. Powers recognized that both age groups were poorer because of it.

She approached officials at St. John's retirement community and explained that she wanted to bring children and oldsters together. After nearly a decade, the goals of Powers' Forever Friends program has spread in Elmbrook and throughout the state.

Second-grader Leslie Lisser's special friend is Betty O'Neill. "We like to talk together and laugh," said Leslie.

"It's great fun to be with the kids and hear what they have to say. Just going places with them is lots of fun," O'Neill said.

O'Neill has been in the program for three years. She still hears from Ryan McGinn, the young boy she teamed up with that first year.

### Families make friends, too

Friendships between elders and children sometimes extend into the child's family. O'Neill attended Leslie's first communion celebration two weeks ago.

This is Clarence Reible's second year in Forever Friends. "Kids are very loyal and they appreciate our friendship," he said. "Last year, my friend was Mike Webber. Next year, I'm going to have his brother, Steve. I think the kids get as much out of this (program) as the grown-ups."

Sashwat Singh is Reible's young friend. Sashwat's grandfather lives in India. It's Reible who is at Hillside for Sashwat's Christmas and spring concerts and for other important events in the child's life. Sashwat says his parents like the idea.

"They want me to make new friends and stuff," he said.

Young Sam Doerr's friend, Mrs. Finn,



Tim McCambridge

couldn't make the trip to West Allis. Occasionally, a child or an adult is absent and Powers doubles them up with another person. Sam had made a stop at the hospital's ambulance and wore a mock bandage around his pretend head injury.

Evelyn Schulz was attracted to Forever Friends because she once had grandchildren at Hillside. Her friend this year is McKenzie Bolton. McKenzie's dad, Dr. Richard Bolton, arranged the hospital tour.

"We've gone a lot of nice places where we might not ordinarily have gone," said Schulz. "It's nice to be with the children."

Schulz and McKenzie talk on the phone between meetings. Schulz sends McKenzie holiday and birthday cards. McKenzie has made art projects for Schulz, and they hang in her room at St. John's.

"People come in and want to know what they are," she said. "Her parents make it a point to come and get me for occasions. Three weeks ago, we were at school for the spring concert. I would love to have had my grandchildren be in this program but (Powers) was just starting it when they were in school."

"Mrs. Schulz is really special to me," said McKenzie. "She does a lot of things for me. She always waits for me if I get behind. Sometimes she hugs me."

McKenzie says she and Schulz will stay in touch.

At the beginning of the day at West Allis Memorial and again at the end, hugs and waves signaled comings and goings. Promises to call and see each other soon confirm that here are kids and elders who really are Forever Friends.

## SPECIAL MEMORIES

By Lee Raynor  
Staff Writer

Sherry Powers and her Forever Friends program have won awards, but none mean as much as the memories of students like Brian O'Dell.

Now an incoming senior at Brookfield Central High School, O'Dell was one of the first Forever Friends. His friend was Sophie Schroeder, a remarkable woman whose spirit imprinted itself on O'Dell and his family. Schroeder died two years ago.

"The teen wrote a letter to be included in a program presentation Powers was putting together. The letter said:

"Hello, dear." That's what she always said every Christmas or any visit or every other day, for that matter. And when I heard it, I felt

good," O'Dell wrote.

"My friend Sophie Schroeder was a beautiful woman. She was the one person I knew who would do anything for children.

"I met Sophie in the second grade during the time I was in the Forever Friends program. All of the friends our class made were special and nice, but in my heart and mind my Sophie always stole the show. Now I wonder if all my classmates didn't feel exactly the same about their friends.

"I remember thinking to myself, 'This woman is 90. I'm 8, and she's running me down. Eight years old and I'm being worn down by a granny.' But that was just it, that Sophie and our friends from St. John's weren't grannies — old, weak, boring, faceless people who had outlived their usefulness. Instead, they were enthusiastic, energetic, interesting people I could share my life with.

"As I think back to special memories, I remember that Mr. Wolff would have stamps for Nicole and Sophie would also have candy for me."

O'Dell ends his letter by writing, "The love, sharing and caring were memorable. As I grew up from second grade, I would still see Sophie a few times a year, and call her on the phone any time I missed her and wanted to talk. I would see the old pictures of us on her walls and on mine. I noticed that I grew up and she never changed.

"My friend, Sophie, is not with us in body today but she lives in my heart and the hearts of the many people she touched. Because of the Forever Friends program, I met one of the most brilliant and energetic and happy women on this earth. I think this special program is a great idea and I feel so fortunate to have been a part of it."