

Bridging the Intergenerational Gap

Two local programs look to bring generations together for understanding, friendship *by Lauren Rouse*



Two local programs are putting a spin on friendships by bringing together senior adults in independent and assisted living facilities with high school and/or college students. Through these mentoring programs, both seniors and students learn from each other, forming friendships along the way.

WYSE

WYSE (Wisdom for Youth from Senior Expertise) is a 12-week intergenerational program pairing senior adult mentors with high school students who meet weekly for an hour working through 10 lessons. The relatively new program — only three semesters old — was started at the Crestview communities in Bryan by the Methodist Retirement Communities Foundation in response to a need to help support residents who have outlived necessary funds.

About 40 students, who are mostly involved in after school activities where community service hours are needed, have participated in the program. They are recommended by teachers and advisors, fill out an application for consideration, and undergo background screenings before being accepted to the program. Seniors interested in participating fill out a questionnaire in order to match them with a student.

“Our residents are having a ball [with the program]. We have had residents like a woman who flew planes in WWII, and one guy has been to over 140 countries. There are rich experiences here. And so to pair them with a student who has totally different thinking from electronics to finances to environment — it is just two different worlds,” said Gary Adams, chaplain at Crestview in Bryan and the Campus Coordinator for the WYSE program at Arbor Oaks. “Our residents are just excited about meeting [the students] and getting to know them.”

Adams was a part of the pilot program that began at Crestview. “As chaplain, I have a lot of contact with the residents. The first semester, since I am of age, they wanted to use me as sort of a trial to see how the program would grow,” Adams said.

Once resident mentors and students are paired, both attend orientation programs. Students learn about the aging process, elder care, senior safety, and program requirements; while the residents learn about the “millennial generation,” mentoring, and more. To help guide weekly hourly discussions, a curriculum is set for each week with topics including childhood and adulthood discussions, financial literacy, values to live by, and traveling. Students also write a biography of their resident,

photo courtesy of WYSE

create a video interview, and create a “value to live by statement” with their resident mentor. The biography and video interview are presented to the resident mentor at the end of term reception. The life slogan is then printed on a brick paver with the resident mentor’s and student’s names, and placed on the grounds of the resident’s community.

Adams hopes that the program crosses intergenerational boundaries and continues to grow in its relationships between residents and students and in the number of active programs. “I hope both sides build a personal relationship, and I hope they can come to a better understanding of the different generations,” Adams said. “I hope the program grows locally in colleges and organizations that want to involve themselves in this intergenerational program. I hope it grows nationally and internationally through the internet so that we get the same intergenerational exchange growing.”

The young program has already won the 2013 Innovative Program of the Year award from LeadingAge Texas, which is an association of non-profit senior living communities that honors these communities making a positive difference in their areas and the profession.

“Some of these students don’t have grandparents or they are not close to them,” Adams said. “There is a real generational gap. I see people that don’t know how to talk. They don’t know how to listen. They come in and sit, and the grandparent can’t hear well, family members don’t speak up, and so everyone is kind of uptight. Parents don’t know what to do with the kid, and the kid doesn’t know what to do with the grandparent — even the adults. So this program starts to break down those barriers. Just because you are old doesn’t mean that you are mean and grumpy, and just because you are young doesn’t mean that you are a hoodlum. So it is breaking down those barriers.”

Golden Years

Similar to the WYSE program at Crestview, is the Golden Years Project, piloted by Wanda Seaback, RN, MS, and Assistant Professor in the College of Nursing at the Texas A&M Health Science Center. After attending a conference session on advancing care for older adults through student assignments, Seaback was inspired to further develop a clinical project with her nursing students.

“Each student is assigned to an older adult who volunteered to interact and meet with the student approximately eight times over the semester,” Seaback said. “Initially, the goal for the student and older adult is to get to know each other and begin building a trusting relationship. They discuss the participant’s health in general and plan for future encounters. At some point they will implement various standardized screening tools that are specific for this age group. Screening tools are used to discover common conditions, such as sleep problems, problems with eating, confusion, fall risk, ability to provide self-care, depression, and cognitive function.”

Seaback outlines a series of learning objectives for students at the beginning of the program, and asks each student to journal about their experiences and thoughts as they interact with the older adult. “After completing all encounters, the student: summarizes the overall Golden Years project experience, screening tools, and results or findings; comments on positive (and/or negative) effects of reminiscing on the participant; identifies effective communication techniques and if they encountered barriers to communication, as well as how they overcame the barriers; identifies how screening tools may be used in future practice; identifies strengths, wishes, and expectations of the participant; and reports what they learned about older adults from the clinical experience.”

Like WYSE, Seaback sees this program expanding and enriching the lives of both students and participating older adults. “One nursing student contacted me as she was about to graduate from our nursing program. She wanted me to know how meaningful this project was for her and that she had established such a positive relationship, she had continued to visit her friend,” Seaback said. “Another student told me she created a DVD of the reminiscing sessions of she and her older adult participant. It was presented to the participant for his family once the project was completed. Can you just imagine how wonderful this was for his family! It’s a great experience for the student and participant! I will continue to develop and enrich this project each semester.”

For more information about the WYSE program visit www.nyseprogram.org or contact Gary Adams at 979.774.6956. For more information about the Golden Years Project, please contact Wanda Seaback at 979.436.0149 or wseaback@tamhsc.edu.

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