Intergenerational Programs Spark Fountains of Youth, Creativity
By Joanne Kaldy

Res earch has documented the benefits of intergenerational programming for older adults, including improved brain and cognitive function. But none of these studies quite capture the pure joy, emotional connections, and feelings of purpose that come from these relationships. “It’s like magic when we bring people together, and all we have to do is introduce them,” said Madison Daminato, a student at the University of Michigan and president of the Perfect Pair program, which uses an extensive matching process to pair college students with seniors in a local assisted living community.

Mary, Ms. Daminato’s “partner,” noted, “I really enjoy learning about changes happening in the world and hearing about the things kids are up to and what’s new.” Ms. Daminato added, “We both have a love of the outdoors and the interconnectedness humans have with the earth. I learn so much from Mary and am so grateful to have her wisdom and perspective.”

A Consistent Presence
Perfect Pair is unique, said Ms. Daminato, “because we focus on a consistent presence. “Once you’re involved with an individual, you have an opportunity to keep the friendship going over a period of time.” She also observed, “I think a lot of students don’t realize how much they will get out of the program.”

These relationships have a health benefit beyond the mental and emotional well-being. Once relationships are established, long-term care facility residents often relax and tell their young friends things they wouldn’t tell staff, practitioners, or even their families. Ms. Daminato said, “We teach volunteers to advocate for their residents and bring things that are concerning them to us.”

Communicating and Creating
The Stagebridge Performing Arts Institute in California offers classes to provide lifelong learning opportunities for older adults with an emphasis on performing arts. “It encourages intergenerational connections. We teach beginning, intermediate, and advanced classes; and we provide spaces for students to invite facilities to share the experience with them,” said Julius Rea, marketing and communications manager at Stagebridge.

“These are practical programs, Mr. Rea said. “There is learning, and older adults get to use acting, theater, music, storytelling, and dance and get artistic tools to share with their communities. We have special event productions with organizations in the area connected with performing arts, healing arts, and creative aging.”

Stagebridge also has a program called Seniors Reaching Out, which provides workshops and healing arts activities where student artists go into the community and share the art they’re working on to invigorate others and promote connections and engagement. “We reach out to other senior communities that don’t have the ability to come to us. We have partnerships with community organizations, libraries, and other shared spaces where intergenerational opportunities can happen,” said Mr. Rea. He added, “We are always looking for partnerships and classes to encourage students to look at their art as intergenerational and that communicate across generations.”

Mr. Rea agreed. He observed that programs like Seniors Reaching Out help overcome ageism. He said, “Many of our students are professional artists. It’s not an ‘elder’ arts event; it’s just an arts event. The more opportunities these talented individuals get to go into the community, perform, and build connections, the more people just see them as artists and not older people who perform,” he said.

“Depth of wisdom and life stories can be revealed through the performing arts,” Mr. Rea said. However, he noted again, added Ms. Young. “I love that they called our residents ‘friends’ because that’s how they saw them — not an older person but as my friend Barbara or Bill. They really enjoyed their time together.”

For her residents, the program frees them — at least temporarily — from being patients to just being people. She stressed, “It’s hugely important to feel ‘normal’ for a while. Because the kids don’t see them in terms of what’s wrong with them, there is a naturalness in their interactions. And they love the children’s honest questions, such as ‘Why are you in that wheelchair? Is it like a racecar?’”

Ms. Young knows from experience the joys of intergenerational connections. She said, “I spent a lot of time with my grandparents and their friends when I was young, and I was in awe of their experiences. That’s part of the reason I do what I do for a career. Having those impressionable experiences at an early age can shape people.” She added, “I don’t have specific data, but I believe it makes a difference and will make the lens through which kids view older people different.”

This popular program had to be paused during the pandemic, but Ms. Young said, “In a COVID world, there are challenges. Zoom isn’t perfect, but sometimes it’s better than nothing. You need to find balance and personal relationships where you can.”

While some intergenerational programs had to be put on hold during the pandemic, others continued to move forward with the help of technology. This was another opportunity for myth busting, Mr. Rea said. “There were stereotypes about older people not being able to use technology, but we taught a lot of students to use Zoom, and we are moving forward with a hybrid model,” said Mr. Rea, adding, “We proved that lifetime learners can always learn and they are able to use the same tech tools as their younger counterparts.”

Myth Breakers
Ms. Daminato said, “Whether people like to admit it, it’s not uncommon to expect lower mental capability because a resident has less physical capability.” She observed that volunteers sometimes mistakenly think they won’t be able to have meaningful relationships with residents who have dementia. However, they find that they can get to know these residents and have mutually enjoyable connections.

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Programs like Perfect Pair also can help students see the joys, challenges, and possibilities regarding careers in long-term care. As Ms. Daminato said, “As students going into medical school or other health care professional programs, you often don’t spend a lot of time working in geriatrics. Some don’t think it’s as exciting as other specialties. But this program shows them that they will work with a very special, important, and complex patient population.”

The Joys of Juvenile Connections
“The photos speak more than I could,” said Stacey Young, MA, ACC/MC, CDP, CADDCT, director, Center of Excellence in Dementia Care at Broadmead in Maryland. Her organization has an initiative with a local preschool program that brings together young children with Broadmead residents with dementia. “The joy in the children’s and residents’ faces speak volumes during these interactions,” She added. “The excitement lasted long after each visit. The residents would converse about it later, laugh, and smile. Even those with cognitive impairments would talk about the children for days.”

The kids were just as excited, wondering when they would see their ‘friends’ again, added Ms. Young. “I love that they called our residents ‘friends’ because that’s how they saw them — not an older person but as my friend Barbara or Bill. They really enjoyed their time together.”

Knock on Doors
Starting an intergenerational program can be rewarding but challenging. Ms. Young suggested, “Knock on doors. Find the right partner. Look for a like-minded organization that shares your values. Use the resources in your community.”

Don’t get discouraged, she advised. “Not every organization will be a good fit, but look at other organizations’ mission and vision, and you can find one that aligns with yours. It’s definitely worth the effort.”

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