

Seniors and students form close bonds through letter-writing campaign



Letter writing for younger generations is becoming something of a lost art, but older Aurora residents are helping some of the youngest find their skills, while forging bonds in the process, through a partnership between St. Jerome Catholic Elementary School and Kingsway Place Retirement Residence.

Recently, the school and the retirement community were awash in red and pink construction paper as students volleyed personalized greetings to residents living just around the corner from the school and, according to Kingsway, the seniors are loving it just as much as the youngsters.

'It's just been so heartwarming,' says Valerie Bennett, Kingsway's Director of Community Relations.

The impromptu program got underway when Kingsway learned the St. Jerome community was interested in corresponding with local seniors. Soon, the Principal asked for a list of residents' names and interests to find some unique fits that spanned the generations.

Soon, students from Junior Kindergarten all the way to Grade 8 were getting in on the act.

'We gave the cards to our residents and they were thrilled with the little messages beside their name, and one student responded with, 'I love puzzles, too,' relating to their common interest,' says Bennett. 'We have a gentleman here who golfs, so I put that on the list, and the student wrote back and said, 'I like to golf, too, and my favourite is the seven-iron.' One resident owned a pharmaceutical company, so the student made the card with a picture of a cough syrup bottle with grapes on the side, and inside it said, 'I hear you sell drugs to people!' which made them laugh!

'We had long letters from the Grade 7s that were just a joy. We have a lady who worked for the Toronto Blue Jays for over 20 years, so of course her correspondence was, 'Did you ever meet the players?' I went down to help her with her correspondence, and she said, 'I have pictures of myself with the Blue Jays, so I had to include copies [of the photos with the letter].'

Around the holiday season, cards from students were sent in envelopes containing chocolates and a candy cane. Residents welcomed the extra treats and set to work on their replies without delay. Some like to get their replies out quickly, while others like to mull over their response with fellow residents, comparing notes along the way.

'One lady is very artistic, so I took pictures of some of her artwork for her reply,' says Bennett. 'One lady put about five bookmarks

to the girls who had written to her. It's a lot of work on both ends [but very rewarding]. When I took them to St. Jerome, the Principal took me to a wall where she had put up every one of our residents' profiles with their pictures and I was absolutely blown away. She said kids go by and say, 'that's my lady' or 'that's my guy,' relating to the profiles on the wall.

'On Valentine's Day, one gentleman who didn't have any children, said 'Never in my whole life have I ever received anything like this.'

As the program continues, Bennett says not only does it keep the residents engaged but it helps students learn how to write a letter, address an envelope, and even practice their cursive, skills that are not in as everyday a use as they once were.

'The effort that was put into their cards, the decoration, the messages inside ' and then from the school point, the Grade 8s are helping them write notes ' and now St. Jerome wants to do a face-to-face in June at the school!' says Bennett with enthusiasm.

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