



Connecting generations

Published: October 26, 2011



PRINT



EMAIL

NO COMMENTS

By Matt Perry

As the first graders descend from the bus, they look wide-eyed at the trimmed grounds and immaculate exterior of the gigantic Eskaton senior living facility.

"This is a nice house!" cooes one young girl standing next to her excited classmates, all of them sporting a blue "Eskaton's Kohler Kids Connection" t-shirt.

She is one of 28 Sacramento-area elementary students visiting the senior facility as part of Eskaton's intergenerational initiative Kids Connection, which pairs young students with older adults during the school year. These "buddies" will share letters, stories, poems, plays, songs, meals, memories and even new technology like Skype.

The goal of Kids Connection is to break down pre-conceived notions of aging, and bridge the generation gap in a culture consumed by youth. The program's motto: "One Nation, Under Age."

Started two years ago when teacher Bobbi Donovan's first grade class from Kohler Elementary School in North Highlands visited the Eskaton Village Carmichael facility, the program now includes 16 Twin Rivers Unified School District classrooms and 10 Eskaton facilities.

Participants include 480 children from the 1st through 8th grades, who are paired with 350 Eskaton adults ages 65 to 103.

Many of the children in the Twin Rivers school district are low-income. About three-quarters receive subsidized meals from the school district.

Donovan looks at the children interacting with their elder buddies, and smiles with satisfaction at the program she helped create.

"Once they've met their buddy, they talk about them all the time," says Donovan, who conceived the program with her sister Betsy Donovan, an Eskaton executive. "They worry about them, they ask about them all the time."

Compassion is one of several traits being taught as part of the "21st Century Skills" emphasized by the Twin Rivers schools to balance the rigors of standardized tests. Other skills stressed include self-direction, socialization, and collaboration: "Those things that we're not measuring on standardized testing but are real world skills," says Bobbi Donovan. "It really helps with their behavior."

"Their reading skills are certainly a by-product of this program," agrees sister Betsy, chief operating officer for Eskaton. "They want to read. They want to write letters."

Join Our Community

Conversation, Newsletter, Briefings

Where the policy world meets the real world on health, environment, land-use, transportation and more.

Sign Up

Follow Us:



Tags

AB 32 AB 109 aging with dignity Ashby Wolfe
 Bay Area breast cancer bridge to reform
 budget children City Heights diesel
 Every Woman Counts foreclosures global
 warming Greater Sacramento
 greenhouse gas health
 insurance health reform
 Healthy San Francisco Housing in-home care
 Medi-Cal nutrition oakland obesity
 pollution prevention prison realignment
 regulation Richmond San Francisco San
 Joaquin Valley Schwarzenegger
 single-payer smoking soda soda tax
 Southern Boarder Southern
 California taxes tobacco transit
 unemployment wellness youth

In return, the older adults receive the warmth and concern of their young friends – and another connection with the “outside” world.” Betsy Donovan says the adults exhibit markedly better health because of the interaction.

The children can appreciate the “knowledge and life experiences” of their older buddies, she adds. “It’s a real positive intergenerational engagement, not just entertainment.”

When they first arrive, the children sit in a circle in front of their new buddies, and sing several songs, starting with “Five Little Monkeys” and ending with “You Are My Sunshine.” Then they give their elder pals a “buddy bag” full of artwork, stickers, and poems to read.

Many of the older adults hold on their laps a colorful introductory letter previously sent to them by their young buddies. Bernadette Conners holds her letter aloft proudly for nearly 10 minutes as the children sing, and eventually meets her buddy Aireyanna with a smile.

Of the 33 assisted-living residents, 22 have signed up for Kids Connection – although more will happily join the program in its second week.

When the buddies are finally introduced, the children are at first tentative, slowly warming up to their new pals as they read out loud or spell letters from their word list on a magnetic spelling board.

“They have lovely manners and they really know how to talk to adults,” admires Rita Reilly, 83, herself a first grade teacher for two years before becoming a full-time mother. Like many seniors, she has two buddies because of the popularity of the program with the school district – Kyra and Perla.

Yelena Lyulkin watches her daughter Ella sitting in front of buddy Jewel Gilmore, 87, who has only a single grandchild, now in college.

“She likes to talk to adults more than kids,” says Lyulkin over the room’s constant chatter. “I guess because she can have an adult conversation. She doesn’t like silly conversations.”

In one corner of the room young Jada and Jesus vie for the attention of their 96 year-old buddy Ben O’Brien, both trying to read him “Hey Diddle Diddle.”

“Did you know I was in the first grade 90 years ago?” asks O’Brien, turning to Jesus. “And I had a friend named Jesus.” He smiles at the young boy, then addresses him in Spanish.

The vibrant O’Brien is Eskaton’s emissary for Kids Connection, joining staff on classroom visits to introduce the program. A former administrative law judge, O’Brien still receives monthly letters from one of last year’s buddies.

“At my age I’ve read nothing but bad, bad, bad news about schools,” he says. “The future’s not all dismal, black and gloomy... “(it) can be a future of progress, happiness, satisfaction and good health for everyone. “

O’Brien says he is “astonished” at the energy of teacher Bobbi Williams.

Although the first meeting is tentative on both sides, past years have proven that trust develops quickly.

“By the second time around (kids) are climbing on wheelchairs and braiding hair and trying on sunglasses,” says Stuart Greenbaum, Eskaton’s vice president of public relations.

During the school year, students will visit their Eskaton facility five times, and adults will travel to the children’s school four times, bringing “wheelchairs, walkers and all,” says Betsy Donovan.

Together, the two generations celebrate birthdays and holidays, have an Easter egg hunt, and trade Valentine's Day cards. The children write memory books to track their experiences between visits.

As the keystone to its intergenerational initiatives, Eskaton's Donovan says next year Kids Connection will be mandatory at all 29 Eskaton facilities, spanning all four care levels: independent living, assisted living, skilled nursing, and memory care.

"I don't think (these kids) are from millionaire families, but they're very able and capable," says O'Brien. "It makes me happy to see they're so well-cared for."

For many of them, the Eskaton bus ride is their first. At lunch, they eat side-by-side with their elder buddies, some using cloth napkins for the first time.

Eskaton residents wear nametags with one or both of their buddies on them. Even their grandchildren will learn who their buddies are.

"The kids Skype their buddies in between visits," says Betsy Donovan, pointing out the added benefit for residents, many of whom now Skype their family members.

Eskaton's Donovan fondly recounts the tale of an elder gentleman who last year was often gloomy and uncommunicative until Kids Connection visits.

"As soon as he sees his buddy he yells out his name and his buddy is immediately in his lap," laughs Donovan. For some residents, it is their strongest connection to the outside world.

The Donovan sisters brainstormed the idea of Kids Connection several years ago when Betsy was executive director of the Carmichael Village site. Management's response was at first lukewarm, she says, as visions of children racing through the Eskaton hallways filled their imaginations.

A collection of photos from Kids Connection was exhibited at the state Capitol earlier this year, and in the summer traveled to the worldwide conference of the intergenerational advocacy group Generations United in Washington, D.C.

It's so far beyond what we thought," says Betsy Donovan. "I've been doing this work for 25 years, and this is the most rewarding experience in long-term care for me."