

JEWEL

A G E M O F A P R O G R A M

Intergenerational Program Makes Kids & Seniors Sparkle

BY VICKI DE VRIES

It's not hard to find a JEWEL in Mount Kisco. The Joining Elders with Early Learners program brings seniors and children together in a warm, social setting that enhances both relationships and viewpoints. Fordham University researchers deemed JEWEL so special that they invested time to observe what really happens when seniors and children spend time together. The results of Fordham's three-year study were presented at a recent breakfast held at the shared site of the 11-year-old JEWEL program, co-sponsored by the Mount Kisco Child Care Center (MKCCC) and Family Services of Westchester's My Second Home (MSH).

JEWEL study co-author Janna C. Heyman, Ph.D. of the Ravazzin Center on Aging at Fordham University, remarked that "the results of this study showed that preschool children involved with an intergenerational program see older adults as healthier, compared to preschool children who are not in an intergenerational program." In fact, Heyman pointed out, "children who see older adults on a regular basis see that they are capable of doing many things. The children do not focus on older adults' limitations." Considering the rapidly aging U.S. population, this study demonstrated that we can be old, healthy and happy.

A Natural Resource

The first stage of the research, appropriately labeled "Diamond," utilized focus groups that met with the participating children, seniors and staff members. "The children loved having the one-on-one attention and being with the older adults," said MSH Director Rina Bellamy. "And the parents of those children loved the fact that their children got time with older adults, because either grandparents were not in the area or the kids didn't have that kind of opportunity. The parents actually saw a change in how the kids viewed older adults."

During one research interview, one young preschooler went on and about how great his Grandpa is. When the researcher spoke to the boy's parents, she learned that he has no grandfather. "The image of his grandparent is the grandfather he sees at the Center," explained Bellamy.

The benefits for the older adults were palpable too. "After the older adult worked with the child, you could see things change," said MKCCC Executive Director Dottie Jordan,



Bellamy's counterpart on the children's side of the program. "You could see it in their verbal and body language and in their personality."

Bringing children and seniors together has had very few downsides, according to Jordan. The study results only reinforced what Jordan and Bellamy and the participants had already perceived—that JEWEL is an unmitigated success.

In the next phase of the Fordham research, "the goal will be to identify the specific kinds of training the staff might need

for working with older adults," said Jordan. While cross-training happens at least three times a year to bring the MSH and MKCCC staffs together to discuss the needs of both groups, getting funding to further explore this topic is critical.

The facets of JEWEL

Every week the program runs 15 different sessions between seniors (called either "Grandma" or Grandpa") from MSH and children, including infants as young as three months, from MKCCC. To help foster relationships, the same children and adults interact together eight times in two months.

Intergenerational Coordinator Linda Collura plans and schedules 50 to 60 activities a month with staff members. "Young kids have lots of energy, so we take into consideration the social, cognitive and physical sides," explained Jordan.

Staff members, one from each group, lead four older adults and four children in activities—art, story-telling, gardening, cooking, and dancing—that usually reflect the season of the year. Every activity starts with a song. The activities serve as "the vehicle for the two groups to engage," said Jordan.

MSH's Bellamy added that "the older adults have a place here and feel useful." This sense of belonging holds true for both sides of what too often has been described as a "generational divide." The children also develop social skills in a warm, caring atmosphere.

Since verbal communication is easier as children become older, they can have a therapeutic impact on the adults.

Continued on page 21

Continued from page 18

“When working with adults with disabilities, children will adapt,” explained Jordan. “Sometimes, the child and the older adult reverse roles, with the child helping the adult.”



Left to right: Liset Reid, United Way; Linda G. Collura, Intergenerational Coordinator for the JEWEL program; Dawn Meyerski, Program Director Mount Kisco Child Care Center (MKCCC); Dottie Jordan, Executive Director, MKCCC; Karen Bonaparte, United Way; and Rina Bellamy, Director My Second Home, at the JEWEL breakfast that took place at MKCCC

Concluding the Obvious

Since a lot of “good stuff” happens in the JEWEL Program, wouldn’t it be great to replicate it? After all, “we’ve created a neighborhood with an extended family,” says Jordan, thanks to a lot of hard work, dedicated staff and the shared site.

On September 26, the volunteer board of JEWEL will be sponsoring the “Feed Me Fresh” Gala at a farm in Bedford. Unlike the typical fundraiser, attendees will not have to rent a tuxedo or spend a fortune on a gown. For more details contact Alexandra Gordevitch at (914) 241-2135 or AGLA@mkdcc.org.

VICKI DE VRIES is a freelance writer/editor and educator living in Westchester County.

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