

Bridging the age gap at ONEgeneration

Young and old unite with understanding and friendship

BY RACHEL HELLER

Bonnie Burkholder, 81, and Lily, 3, might not share the same taste in fashion, toys or movies.

But they both know how to do the Hokey Pokey — even if Lily would rather sit in Burkholder's lap than shake it all about with the other children and seniors in the all-purpose room.

As music plays for a dance floor dotted with walkers, wheelchairs, pigtailed and Mickey Mouse sweatshirts, Lily clings to Burkholder because "she's my friend."

Friendships like theirs spring up often around ONEgeneration. It's just another gratifying result of uniting children and the elderly for daycare at the same place.

Located on a near-rural spread in Van Nuys, the nonprofit ONEgeneration offers a host of programs designed to reintegrate these two increasingly disparate generations — aging seniors in need of social stimulation, and young children in need of affectionate care. With their intergenerational Daycare Center, Senior Enrichment Center and personalized Care Management services for homebound residents, the organization aims to boost the quality of life for the Valley's young and old alike.

"In other societies, it's common for children to live in the same house as their grandparents," said Karen Srour, Director of Development. "It's natural elsewhere, but not so much here. We recreate the feeling of a family." Not just any family. Ninety percent of the 130 seniors that visit the center two to five times per week are cognitively impaired — suffering from Alzheimer's or dementia — while the 92 children that come each day range in supervision needs from six weeks old to six years.

Seniors and youngsters spend most of their time in separate daycare facilities, connected by an outdoor pathway. Apart, elderly participants listen to music, chat in sunny day rooms or loosen up with light exercise. Kids, split into age groups, discard clean shirts for painting lessons or learn about the solar system in the program's NAEYC-accredited pre-school. Eight times a day, different groups of children get a visit from their "neighbors," as the seniors are called, or file eagerly into their neighbors' facility to visit them.

"We're so happy that you're here today," sing the participants of one intergenerational group in their customary "hello song." Some of the two-year-olds sit on the seniors' laps. This particular group will be making toast, painting slices of white bread with food coloring-tinted butter. Whether or not participants actually eat their rainbow creations isn't the point, said Kelly Bruno, Vice President of



Three-year participant Robert Maneri spends time with Dylan, 3.

Intergenerational Programs. "These activities focus on process, not product. The idea is to get everyone engaged," she noted. Lego blocks and clay bridge the generational gap in another group, where Rose Nishida, 78, is making fish-shaped Play-Doh cutouts with Sam, 3. The fish may not resemble any natural sea creature, but the pair's method of working together with their hands is as perfect as any nature-made process. Children develop stereotypes about their world as early as age three, Bruno said. Playing side-by-side stops negative impressions of old age from forming young. "It's not so much what children think as what they don't think," she stated. "We help create a foundation of value and respect for the older generation, so kids know seniors aren't 'grumpy and smelly' — they're fun and playful."

Such efforts are paying off for both age groups.

Kids attending ONEgeneration's daycare and pre-school have rated more empathetic than children at other local accredited schools, according to a Pennsylvania State University-developed test conducted by California State University Northridge researchers. Similarly, a study published in the American Journal of Alzheimer's Disease in 2003 found adults with dementia achieved a lasting good mood during shared activities with children. Pages of scientific evidence are summed up in Bonnie Burkholder's smile.

"I love being around these babies," she said, releasing Lily for her trip back to the kids' side of campus. "I just love to hug and squeeze them. It makes me feel good; it makes me remember my own grown-up babies."

For many seniors, being around the youngsters — which is optional — brightens their whole demeanor. An observer could easily forget that they would otherwise be in nursing homes.

"Families choose us as an alternative to nursing homes, with a better quality of life," said Bruno. "Our goal is never to institutionalize — to keep seniors with their families until the end."

That philosophy has worked wonders for participants like Mary Woods. After a stroke froze her faculties in 2005, her husband, Dave Woods, enrolled her in a nursing home. "They didn't take care of her," he recalled, so he brought her to ONEgeneration instead. Mary regained 70 percent of her mobility and mental faculties in just three months, Dave noted, deeming his wife's recovery "a miracle."

Stories like these are due in no small part to the unpaid workers that keep ONEgeneration running, said Bruno. Supplementing the agency's 100 paid staffers is a database of several thousand volunteers.

"Both the staff and volunteers really buy into the mission here, and it makes all the difference," said Mary Kirby of Encino, a two-

year volunteer who even interned with the organization twice for her studies at CSUN. "If you love what you're involved in, the standard of work and care is incredible."

On one particular day, 30 teenagers from Louisville High School in Woodland Hills are helping out at the Daycare Center. Senior Camille Balsamo-Gillis, 17, is just learning to work with the three-year-olds.

"Some aren't ready to warm up to the neighbors, but it opens their eyes," said Balsamo-Gillis after a tea party with the children. "Maybe some don't see their grandparents a lot. This is a good way for both of them to get that same feeling."

At the only agency in the U.S. that offers both accredited senior and childcare programs, participants know that each division is quality — together, they make magic.

"It's a case of 'one plus one equals three.' It's that beneficial combined," Bruno said.

But ONEgeneration doesn't stop there. Added to the equation is their landmark Senior Enrichment Center (OSEC) just a mile down the road in Reseda, a social hub and hangout for the area's more active seniors.

There, locals aged 60 and up amble in and out as they please to enjoy catered meals, participate in some of the center's 68 classes, or meet up for a game of backgammon at a picnic table outside.

OSEC is the first stop in ONEgeneration's colorful history. Started as a storefront peer counseling program in 1978, the organization built the facility to fill void of available activities for mobile seniors not needing constant care.

The Daycare Center, constructed at its current location in 1993, was first founded seven years earlier as a small program within OSEC where active seniors could leave their less capable loved ones while they went off for tap dancing and pool.

"Active seniors are society's best-kept secret," said OSEC Director Rebecca Mostow, lamenting frequent T.V. depictions of the elderly as frail, toothless, and mentally impaired. "As we get older, we don't always fall apart."



Edith Wortez, 88, plays Legos with Jennifer, 3.

Take Keith Kropke, 62, who not only comes to the center for meals and classes, but also volunteered at ONEgeneration's Miles of Smiles Walk/Run fundraiser at Lake Balboa

this September. He plans to try a ceramics class next, "to do something different."

Many senior participants donate their time to the organization, helping out with fundraisers and mailings. Eunice Bagel, 84 first joined OSEC for a bereavement class and has stuck around as a volunteer for the past five years.

"I enjoy helping my peer group," she said. "A lot of people my age don't know what to do with themselves. Lost a husband, lives alone...I know the story, so I can help."

Bagel praised OSEC's "wonderful atmosphere" in particular. "We don't have to be ashamed of our walkers or canes."

Good thing — a typical weekly class schedule allots little time for shame, anyway.

Seniors can bounce from a 7:30 a.m. advanced exercise course

to 9 a.m. oil painting, then practice self assertion at 10 and Polynesian dance after lunch. Bingo, billiards, yoga and Yiddish flesh out a well-rounded day, with a heated current events discussion in room 107 to absorb two spare hours.

Even those who come only for meals get something out of the upbeat ambiance. Benjamin Franklin, who claimed to be "17 going on 16," strolls in for breakfast and lunch every day because

"these are all my friends; I love them." Friendships form there regularly, Mostow said — even a few romances have blossomed.

"These seniors want to be active physically and mentally," she noted of the almost 400 people served at OSEC each day. "They're not sitting home watching T.V. They're being part of something — they're living in the moment."

For many, that includes participating in the intergenerational activities open to OSEC members.

Joyce Grair, Intergenerational Activities Manager, sets up programs through LAUSD schools pairing senior mentors with pregnant teens, foster children and disabled students. The ONEgeneration Travel Office sends seniors and children alike anywhere from the Walt Disney Concert Hall to Yosemite National Park. And volunteers of all ages join forces every Sunday morning at the Encino Farmers Market, which ONEgeneration founded in the Daycare Center's parking lot in 1994.

But the organization also recognizes the needs of those who can't get out to socialize whenever they'd like.

Care Management services accommodate the Valley's homebound seniors, providing transportation, a fall prevention program, assistance with light housekeeping, and a comprehensive Homebound Meals program.

A team of drivers — some paid, some volunteer — deliver about 250 hot meals per day to seniors through the program.

Jose Lovato, 70, has delivered meals for the past seven years. Though sudden illness and death have changed his route over time, he still finds himself growing close with the faces he sees each day. "Through conversation, I find out their politics, their needs. Some are depressed. Others are angry; others are sick. I try to deal with their conditions in a way that makes them feel better," Lovato said, recalling one 100-year-old man who even told him, "you're the only one I can talk to," about his long and colorful life.

Dolores Freeman, manager of Homebound Meals, said Lovato's experience isn't unusual. "It's not only about the food; it's about human contact every day. We like to say our drivers deliver care." That notion is personified by three-year driver Jose Tofoya. Tofoya's car was stolen the day before Thanksgiving this year as he was delivering meals at a senior complex in Reseda. Having lost half the meals for his route, he called Freeman to have extra frozen parcels delivered for the long weekend.

When police found his car in Hollywood a few days later, the side was banged up but all the food was still inside.

Tofoya isn't deterred by the incident. "I'm going to keep doing this," he said with a resolute nod. "I just need new wheels." ■



Rose Nishida, 78, makes Play-Doh cutouts with Sam, 3.

Located at 17400 Victory Boulevard, Van Nuys. Call (818) 708-6625 or visit www.onegeneration.org.