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A Magic Mix: After-School Programs in A Nursing Home

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During a rehearsal break, a young performer visits with her special friend. Artist Dick Swartz depicts their "magic mix."

t 3:00 every
afternoon. Mon-
day through Fri-
day. 8-year-old

Darlene and nine of her classmates leave school and ride a special bus that brings them to a nearby nursing home where they participate in an after-school program. At the nursing home, residents anxiously await the children's arrival. Many of them have been sitting patiently in the lobby for over an hour.

At 3:15, the children enter the lobby with backpacks and books in hand and eyes eagerly scanning the crowd for their special friends, ending the search with an exchange of greetings, hugs and laughter. An assortment of cookies, apples, milk and juice is neatly spread out on the center of the table. "Chocolate chip cookies—I love chocolate chip cookies!" Max exclaims, reaching across the table to take some. "Here's one for you George, we can share."

George responds with a grin as he enthusiastically accepts Max's offer.

After the snacks, everyone becomes absorbed in the dress rehearsal for the musical production. The cast dons their costumes first. While the crew is busy setting up props, the activity room buzzes with excitement. As the air fills with a chorus of voices, Sally, the program director,

interrupts: "Let's take it from scene two.

It sounds great so far but we need to polish up a few things." Faces young and old study their instructor as they concentrate on perfecting their roles. The room is alive with activity until rehearsal ends.

At 4:30 it is time for the students to do their homework. Some residents have remained to help the children with their studies, while those lucky enough not to have homework arrange themselves in a circle around Millie, who reads aloud from *The Adventures*

of Mark Twain. Eyes fixed on their storyteller, the children listen raptly, savoring her every word.

Gradually, parents trickle in to take their children home. As each one leaves, there are the usual hugs and goodbyes. A familiar sight is that of parent and child walking hand-in-hand down the hall while the child eagerly relates the day's events.

The last to leave is Darlene, who says her goodbyes to Millie and, half-way down the hallway, runs back to give her one more hug. But tomorrow is another day, with more secrets and conversations to share and new things to look forward to and do. As Darlene skips down the quiet hallway, she sings, "We are f-a-m-i-l-y."

* * *

A Magic Formula

Something magical is taking root at Genesis Health Ventures Retirement and Rehabilitation Centers, a progressive long-term care company that operates 27 nursing home facilities in Maryland, Virginia, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Massachusetts and Delaware. That something special is an intergenerational after-school child care program. Nursing and retirement home residents are opening their hearts and homes to area children who need a safe, healthy environment where they can congregate until their parents come home from work. The project's formula for success is a blend of love, understanding and sharing that provides residents and students alike a 2-way mechanism for learning and teaching values and skills. We refer to this formula as the Magic Mix.

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When Genesis Health Ventures launched its Intergenerational Latchkey Program in Agawam and Springfield, Massachusetts, in the fall of 1987, its purpose was to offer an alternative to day care centers and babysitting services for children in need of after-school care. The goal was to create an enriching environment where both old and young could learn about and from each other.

The program operates in partnership with the Springfield Public Schools, Springfield School Volunteers and the Agawam Public Schools. Ten to 15 children—primarily those from low-income, one-parent families—have been selected by the schools to participate in the two pilot projects that Genesis Health Ventures has established at four of its nursing care facilities. The children's interests are matched as closely as possible to those of the nursing home residents. The schools designate high school and, in some instances, college students to assist in coordinating activities for the children and elderly. Recreational directors from the nursing facilities identify elderly residents who are able to interact with children.

All the programs are developed through the input of residents and students, as well as parents, and activities are socially and educationally structured.

Both the school and nursing home contribute to the cost of the program, which is free to participants. The school is responsible for busing the students to the nursing facility each day, and for providing a school coordinator and program evaluator. The nursing homes and retirement centers provide the facility and personnel to monitor the program, as well as supplies and nutritious snacks. Parents are responsible for picking up their children at the end of the work day.

Bringing Young and Old Together

Because many students have never visited a nursing home, it is important that this first meeting be made easy for them. Recreation directors conduct sensitivity workshops to give each participating student a brief opportunity to encounter some of the physical and mental limitations commonly experienced by the elderly. For



Photos courtesy of Genesis Health Ventures.

Shared interests can be discovered over a shared newspaper.

example, to create the illusion of diminished eyesight or blindness produced by such medical problems as cataracts or glaucoma, children wear safety glasses smeared with vaseline. Students are then paired with a sighted person and asked to describe how they feel with distorted vision. Such exercises give the children a much better perspective on the hardships faced by elders who suffer visionary losses.

Other exercises simulate hearing loss, physical impairments, and the loss of personal choices. Discussions follow these exercises and the students are encouraged to ask questions. The teachers also highlight the beneficial impact of the students' visits on the nursing and retirement home residents. Many students are so impressed by the sensitivity workshops that they share their experiences with fellow classmates.

The Magic Mix does not occur instantaneously. In the beginning, many of the children are shy, although they are very excited to meet their new extended family members. In just a few short days, however, both young and old are comfortable and solid relationships begin to form.

What types of activities can the older and younger participants enjoy together? In addition to the musical production mentioned earlier, they share painting, sculpturing, cooking, drama, singing, poetry, horticulture, crafts, language, history exchanges, spelling bees, nature walks, games, picnics and community service projects, such as baking for an organization that feeds the homeless. Sometimes a child will need a helping hand with homework ... or someone with the time to listen to a problem.

In addition to bringing young and old together in a creative, enriching environment, the latchkey program has generated a number of other dividends. Besides demonstrating an alternative method to teaching and learning, the interaction between students and nursing home residents has forged a bond between the two generations that is enhancing mutual respect and understanding. Through



A nursing home resident unveils the portrait she painted—from the photograph in the background—of 8-year-old Darlene and her special friend.

of Massachusetts has initiated legislation that fosters continuing education among nursing home residents using it as a model for the state.

The Intergenerational Learning Program encourages students from local schools to visit a nursing home once a week for four weeks to learn history from the residents. At the conclusion of these sessions—featuring discussions on topics ranging from differing lifestyles and values to the changing roles of women—residents are invited to attend a class on the Great Depression at the students' schools.

In the Intergenerational Computer Course, 5th- and 6th-graders—each with his or her own computer—lead nursing and retirement home residents, on a one-to-one basis, through the intricacies of learning how to use a computer.

Such public-private partnerships "have had a significant impact on the Springfield public school system," says Thomas J. Donahoe, Superintendent of the Springfield Schools. "The nursing and retirement home residents of Heritage Hall and Kendall Commons Hampden House and Chapin Center have brought a wealth of knowledge, historical perspective and caring warmth to our students. These people represent a tremendous untapped resource."

Evaluating the Latchkey Program

To measure the program's success and effectiveness, a control group of children was established and the Springfield Schools Department of Research developed a survey designed to assess the impact of the program on the students' school attendance, behavior patterns, self-image and enthusiasm for intergenerational activities. The survey also included questions that reflect prevalent stereotypes of both older persons and young people. For example, participants answer "true" or "false" to the following questions: "All older people are cranky and lonely" and "All children are rambunctious and spoiled."

Findings from the survey reveal

that students participating in the latchkey program had fewer absences from school than youngsters in the control group (10.6 percent compared to 14.4 percent, respectively). Parents, nursing home residents and school personnel all noted significant improvement in the children's behavior as a result of their participation. One mother, for example, observed that her child is "happier, more relaxed and comes home talking about the older people."

A school principal commented: "Their experiences carry over into school. They work better with others and take on more responsibility. Some of the children don't know their grandparents, and the program gives them a new outlook on what it means to be old. It shows them that the elderly can still be productive."

Another evaluation component involves periodic visits to the nursing and retirement home facilities by an impartial observer to evaluate the children's interactions with the elderly residents. Observers who visited the program on five different occasions report that a sense of caring was very evident on the part of both students and residents, especially when residents needed more attention.

However, perhaps the best testimony to the success of this expanding intergenerational partnership is the enthusiastic endorsement of the children, high school students and nursing and retirement home residents—an endorsement that reflects the deepening bonds of awareness, respect, admiration and affection between young and old participants. Eleven-year-old Raquel Diaz observes, "It's nice to be around older people. You learn how to be kinder and share feelings." Sixth-grader Maria Velez enjoys "hearing about the residents' past," especially descriptions of old-fashioned Christmas celebrations, while 6th-grader Kirsten Johannessen has learned "what it's like to be living in a nursing home and that older people can do many things we can do."

Comments from 11-year-old Max Marrero indicate that before his par-

ticipation in the latchkey program, he was restless and bored coming home from school to an empty house. Now, he notes, the sessions with residents break the tedium of long afternoons and lift his spirits: "The residents make me happy. If I'm down, I feel better when I go to the nursing home." Springfield Central High School graduate Stephanie Harris points out that her work with the residents at Kendall Commons Hampden House has given her a new perspective on older people that spurred her to apply for a nurse's aide position there.

The residents also report that their involvement has added a new dimension to their lives. Hampden House resident Margaret Berndt says her participation in the latchkey program "gives me something to do, rather than watching TV." Josephine Kzeszutek, a Hampden House resident for 15 years, says she looks forward to seeing the students because she feels lonely when she's not active. "I enjoy the children. I never had any of my own so I like to hear them talk." A resident of Hampden House for more than 14 years, Claire Gray stresses that visits from the children keep her active. "It keeps your mind off yourself. It helps you prove you can still do things, that you're not helpless." Mrs. Gray especially likes to share personal histories with the children because "when I look back I realize I made some mistakes, and I would like to help the children avoid making them."

Resident Millie Ross eloquently summarizes the feelings and thoughts of all the residents: "The children have become part of our lives—there was a void here before. They literally light up our lives and we kind of give them security. We bridge the gap. It's being with someone, being loved by someone. They bring love and laughter into all our lives."

