

Section:

On Assignment

Walk through the doors of the Grace Living Center and you may think you've ended up in the wrong place. The first things you hear in this nursing home are parakeets chirping, doves cooing, and children laughing. Then you see what seems to be an indoor park, complete with benches, lampposts, a bubbling fountain, and an ice cream stand. The far wall is one huge floor-to-ceiling window that looks out on a playground, where children play tag and climb on a blue and red jungle gym. Other youngsters ride around the perimeter of the playground on a track built so adult wheelchairs can scoot alongside children's tricycles.

Inside, a two-room school housing a kindergarten and a preschool classroom sits off to the left of the atrium. On this December morning in the kindergarten, 88-year old Leona Alsip—"Grandma Leona" to the children here—is leaning over in her wheelchair, closely watching a boy who is using icing to glue chocolate graham crackers to the roof of a gingerbread house he is making.

"Do you think your roof is strong enough to hold that?" she asks.

"Uh-huh," the kindergarten boy says, sounding a little unsure.

When his roof holds, Grandma Leona claps her hands and says, "Good job!" The youngster beams proudly at his classmates sitting around the table.

This unusual combination of young and old in the same facility came about as the result of a partnership between Donald Greener, the owner of the Grace Living Centers chain of nursing homes in Oklahoma, and the Jenks school district. Though some observers caution that there are potential problems in such arrangements, Greiner and district officials say the partnership seems to be working well here.

Such a generational match can be good for children, says Marilou Hyson, the associate executive director for professional development at the Washington-based National Association for the Education of Young Children. She notes that many young children live far away from their grandparents and can benefit from interaction with older adults, and the adults can enjoy being with the children.

"It sounds to me like a win-win situation," Hyson says of the shared facility in Jenks.

Diane Bosworth, the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction in the 9,300-student Jenks district, echoes Hyson's sentiments. "It's pretty amazing," she says. "They are gifts to each other, really," she says of the elderly residents and their young neighbors.

Bosworth designed the program in the summer of 1998 after Greener approached her. Initially, Greiner was planning only to renovate and modernize his nursing home. But when he saw a child-care center next door, he began thinking about adding a playground outside his facility to encourage the children from the center to visit the residents.

Doing that, he realized, would fit perfectly with his philosophy about how to run nursing homes. Greener and his employees at the Jenks facility in suburban Tulsa are participants in a movement in the nursing home industry called the "Eden Alternative," which promotes the idea that introducing children, plants, and animals into homes for the elderly greatly benefits the residents of the homes.

As it happened, that child-care center next door was part of the Jenks district's community education program, which provides a variety of fee-based activities and services to the community.

So Greiner, a thin, sharply dressed 37-year-old who speaks in soft tones but at a quick, excited pace, met with Richard Wright, the district's director of community education, to try to devise a program that would bring children into the nursing home daily. What started as an idea to add a playground soon turned into plans to add a classroom inside the facility.

At that point, Wright turned the project over to Bosworth, who upped the ante and suggested that Greener add not only one classroom, but two, so that the teachers at the nursing home would not feel isolated.

Greiner committed to adding the classrooms and the adjacent playground, to the tune of \$200,000, but he still had doubts that the district would follow through with the plan. "I was just convinced that someplace in the hierarchy of the district, I would meet someone who would say, 'We can't do this,'" he recalls.

Just the opposite happened, says Kirby Lehman, the superintendent of the Jenks public schools. When Lehman presented the partnership idea to the school board, "it was like light bulbs went off," he says. "You think, 'Of course. It's unusual, but of course.'"

Lehman says he was surprised to find out that an independent businessman like Greener was willing to spend so much money on the partnership. At the time, the district was going to need to add two preschool classes anyway. And Lehman liked the idea of connecting the old with the young. Now, the retirement home and the school share the same name—Grace Living Center.

"The philosophy is to have a living center, and not just a center where people are waiting to die," says Lehman. A black kitten scampers down a hallway decorated with hand-painted scenes of a Victorian-era town. The cat turns left into the home's wallpapered and carpeted library across the hall from the classrooms. Among the inviting sofas and a round game table, another kitten lounges in a carpeted cat bed. This facility serves not only 110 residents—whose average age is 81—but 60 pupils ages 4 and 5; more than 20 parakeets, lovebirds, and white doves; a variety of tropical fish; two black cats and two black-and-white cats; plus a poodle and a Chihuahua.

This all fits right in to the Eden Alternative movement, which was started in 1992 by Dr. William Thomas, a physician based in Sherburne, N.Y., who specializes in gerontology.

Thomas says there are three "plagues" in nursing-home care: loneliness, helplessness, and boredom. To combat those conditions, which can lead to serious emotional illnesses such as depression, residents need to have spontaneity to stave off boredom, companionship to fight loneliness, and something or someone to care for to battle helplessness.

The sterile environments found in most nursing homes led Thomas to start a campaign for elderly people to have another option in their care. "It makes common sense," he argues. "If I gave you a choice that you could spend the rest of your life in a building filled with concrete and tile, or one that is filled with plants, animals, and children, which would you choose?"

Thomas adds that kindergarten was founded on the idea that children would flourish in a garden-like setting, much the way the Eden Alternative strives to surround the elderly and infirm with life.

Currently, 300 nursing homes nationally and 400 worldwide officially subscribe to the Eden Alternative approach, according to Thomas.

As a group of about a dozen 2-year-olds from the child-care center next door gathers in the atrium to sing songs for the residents, the toddlers fidget and tug on their coats. As might be expected of such fledgling performers, the children mumble through the songs.

Some of the nursing home residents watch intently. But Faye Ashton, a frail woman sitting in the rear of the audience, nods off during the performance. Her head slumps over onto her chest.

After the singing ends, the children pass out pictures they have drawn for the residents. A blonde girl toddles over to Ashton and places an oversized drawing of bells and holly on the woman's lap.

After Ashton, or "Grandma Faye," wakes up and eyes the picture, her mouth curves into a huge grin. As the girl scampers away, Ashton doesn't say a word, but her signature smile lingers long after the group of children leaves the building.

It's an understatement to say that children are an integral part of daily life at Grace Living Center. The facility's beauty salon, called Timeless, is next to the preschool and kindergarten classrooms and has windows that look into the school, so that residents who are getting their hair done can watch the children. The glass classroom door was built with a 6-inch gap between the top of the door and the ceiling so that the sounds of the children would echo through the center. And the kindergartners eat lunch in the hall just outside their classroom so that they can visit with the residents who walk by during that time.

This integration is a "beautiful idea," says Sally Newman, a retired professor and researcher of intergenerational studies at the University of Pittsburgh.

But a good-looking facility and willing participants are not the only keys to a successful partnership—especially when the participants are children and the elderly, says Newman. The school and the nursing home must have "somebody who is aware of the idiosyncrasies of each group and how they match and how they don't match," she says.

In Jenks, that liaison is Sharla Walker, an energetic 34-year-old who seems to laugh her way through most of the day. When asked to describe her job at the nursing home, she says enthusiastically, "I play with elderly people and kids all day, and they pay me for it!"

Walker meets with Jamie Lazalier, the preschool teacher, and Ellen Pongrace, the kindergarten teacher, once a month to review the children's lesson plans. She then plans activities for the residents that go along with the theme of the unit the children are studying.

For example, some residents need to work on their fine motor skills, so they participate in activities such as cutting and drawing. Others need help with their memories, so they play memory games with the children, Walker says.

The 21 pupils in the half-day kindergarten program spend part of each day at different "centers" in the room. There are writing, science, and math centers, and a center called "Grandmas and Grandpas," where the residents and children work on activities together.

In this center, the metal legs on one of the white Formica tables have been adjusted so that wheelchairs fit in the space more easily. The chairs there are also larger than the small versions built for the children.

Roughly 70 percent of the residents at Grace Living Center interact with the children on a regular basis. Some, like Grandma Leona, visit the classes almost daily. Walker tries to keep residents who are not mentally capable of socializing well with the children away from the classrooms. But she says she does not keep residents away because of their physical limitations, unless they are simply unable to get out of bed.

Sometimes, the children help the residents in unexpected ways.

Walker says that when she would walk by Louie Collins, a tall 71-year-old, she would say hello. In response, Collins would raise his hand, but never say a word.

Then one day when Walker was out in the facility supervising a group of children, she walked by Collins and said hello. He raised his hand in the usual way.

After she had passed him, she heard a man's voice behind her saying "hello." It was Collins. She turned around and saw him shaking hands with one of the children. It was the first time she had ever seen him talk to anybody.

There are abundant chances for other interaction.

For instance, most of the residents nag the children constantly to tie their shoes. "We call them the shoe police," jokes Walker.

And once a group of youngsters encountered a resident who had an amputated leg. A metal pole stuck out from her skirt where her leg once was. "What happened to your leg?" the children asked.

Walker says she told them that the woman's leg wasn't working so she had to go the doctor and have it cut off. "I always try to answer their questions honestly and use words they understand," she says.

Then one small boy piped up and said to the resident with the amputated leg, "I know what it is. You have a robot leg!" Suddenly all of the children in the group agreed that the woman did have a robot leg, which they greatly approved of, Walker says.

Indeed, having older people around has made the children more accepting of people with disabilities, says Ellen Pongrace, the kindergarten teacher. "They know that it's OK to be different," she says.

From a developmental point of view, says Newman of the University of Pittsburgh, children need to see adults at every stage of their lives. So when they spend time with the elderly, they need to be exposed to people who are energetic and mobile, as well as those who are frail and infirm. "Children should see adults with varying degrees of need," she says. If they are in an environment with older people who are weak and fragile, they will tend to see all older people in that light, she says.

Though the residents at Grace Living Center are not exactly in the kind of shape to be out playing tennis every day, some are more mobile and sprightly than others. And that's something the teachers have learned to appreciate as much as the children.

When she began teaching at Grace Living Center, for instance, Pongrace says she was surprised at the level of need the residents require. "I envisioned at first 'The Golden Girls,' or my own parents. But there is a reason they are in a nursing home," she says.

Still, she says the children benefit from seeing the residents' physical limitations.

One mother told Pongrace that her daughter had been wary of people in wheelchairs before she entered the program at Grace Living Center. Now, when the girl sees a person in a wheelchair at the shopping mall or other public places, she runs up to see who it is and says hello.

Early one afternoon, Walker enters the preschool classroom, chats briefly with Lazalier, and then raises her voice slightly to address the class. "Who wants to go visit the Grandmas and Grandpas?" she asks.

Immediately, almost every pupil in the class volunteers. Some of the children are still finishing the art project the class is working on; but still, 14 of the 20 pupils are able to accompany Walker on a trip around the building to visit the residents. Three times a week, the children leave the classroom to visit the residents who are too sick or too frail to leave their beds.

And the children know the rules: walk, don't run; use "indoor" voices; and be polite. Walker also tells children, "We don't hold our noses and tell people that they smell bad." Instead, the youngsters are instructed to ask to go to another room. Walker looks as if she is herding cats as she tries to coax the energetic 4-year-olds into a line. The group enters a sitting room where a black-and-white cat is lazing on a sofa. As they pass, the children wave and say hello to Grandma Alice, a 98-year-old resident of the home, who is sitting on a couch visiting with her son.

"They know everyone's name," Walker says of the children.

The next stop is Grandma Nez's room, a particularly popular place with the students because they like to see the colorful plastic flower that lights up on her nightstand. Unfortunately, Grandma Nez is not in her room, so the children miss their opportunity to see the light show. But during this walk, the youngsters meet and talk to at least a dozen residents.

"They know who has animals, who has flowers, and who gives the candy," says Walker. In fact, she adds, when parents visit the school for open house, they are often eager to meet a certain resident because their children are so familiar with him or her.

Still, not all the walks through the home have gone this smoothly, Walker says. Once, she walked through an open door into a room in which a resident was undressing. She was able to stop the children from entering the room and close the door before they were able to see the woman. She made a lesson out of the experience, and told the children that this was a good example of why it is important to always close their doors when they are getting dressed.

Walker is aware that problems like this can occur in such an environment. "You have to remember that this is where these people live," she says.

Other, more serious problems can arise as well. According to Jerry Taylor, the enforcement coordinator for the Oklahoma Department of Health, the Grace Living Centers have a good reputation in the state, and have historically had only a few minor problems.

However, he says other nursing homes in the state have had histories of neglecting residents. And he cautions that children could be at risk if they were exposed to residents who were not bathed regularly, or if conditions in the facility were unsanitary. Taylor says that nothing of that sort has occurred at Grace Living Center in Jenks.

As an added safety precaution, Assistant Superintendent Bosworth says she made sure the facility ran a criminal-background check on every resident who would come into contact with the children. And district officials acknowledge it took some convincing to get parents to send their children to a nursing home for preschool and kindergarten. At open houses the district held to introduce parents to the preschool program, Lazalier, the preschool teacher at Grace Living Center, heard some parents saying that they didn't want their children to go to school there because they thought the nursing home was not a good environment for their children.

She says she tells parents with such concerns to visit the facility before they judge it. Generally, once parents see the facility, they understand that it is not the stark, white, sterile nursing home they had envisioned, says Lazalier. "If people will keep an open mind to it, they will see it is the best of both worlds," the teacher says.

Shed Hughes says she knew right after learning about the unusual partnership that she wanted her daughter Molly to attend school at Grace Living Center. Hughes works with the elderly on a daily basis in her job fitting hearing aids at Advantage Audiology in Tulsa, which is why she thought it would benefit Molly. "She likes being around older people," Hughes says.

Another benefit is that the facility looks and smells clean, says Hughes. "It's very uplifting, airy and open, and I think that is good for the residents and the kids," she says.

Last year, Bill Smalls—also known as Grandpa Bill—visited the children almost every day and became an important part of their lives. He was in the nursing home recovering from a stroke that left him partially disabled.

Whenever a child has a birthday at the school, the youngster wears a crown, and the class has a party. So on Grandpa Bill's 56th birthday, he too wore a crown, and the children sang "Happy Birthday" to him.

In the spring of last year, Grandpa Bill had another stroke and was taken to a hospital. When he returned, he could not walk and could barely talk. The children made him a get-well card for his room. Soon, he began pointing at the card as a way to ask to go to the atrium so that he could watch the children in their classroom.

By the end of the school year he was back inside the classroom, signing the children's yearbooks.

Last June, Grandpa Bill died.

The preschool class of 2000-01 stayed at Grace Living Center and entered kindergarten there last fall with their same teacher, Ellen Pongrace.

One of the first things they asked when they returned to school was "Where is Grandpa Bill?"

Sharla Walker, the liaison between the nursing home and the school, says that because Bill Smalls died in the summer and she grieved for him then, she had forgotten that the children would miss him when they returned. She immediately wrote a letter for all of the students to take home to their parents in which she explained the situation and suggested that each family talk to its child about death.

The next day, Walker held a small assembly so that the children could talk about how they felt and what their parents had told them. Even now, months later, Walker says pupils still tell her, "I miss Grandpa Bill."

Undoubtedly, he is still very much on the children's minds. During a visit to the school library one day last fall, the kindergartners saw a skeleton. The youngsters were curious about the bones and asked if they were real.

Then they noticed that atop the skull of the skeleton was a cap for the Trojans, the local high school football team. Grandpa Bill often wore a similar hat. Out of nowhere, says Walker, one little boy blurted, "Those are Grandpa Bill's bones!"

Of course, the teacher told the children the bones were not, in fact, Grandpa Bill's.

Yet such curiosity about death, like that stirred in Jenks by the children's memories of Grandpa Bill, should not be discouraged, experts say. And concern about exposing children to death should not be seen as an obstacle to a program like the one at Grace Living Center, says Hyson of the NAEYC. "Death is a part of life," she says. "We can't protect children from everything sad in the world."

Sheri Hughes' daughter Molly was one of the children who knew Grandpa Bill. His death did not change her mind about the benefits of the program for her child. Echoing Hyson, Hughes says, "Dying is part of living, so it is OK that the children understand what is going on with these people."

During "circle time" for the kindergarten class one morning last month, Pongrace asks the pupils what makes their class extra special. After a couple of minutes, 5-year-old Mckayla Hendrix says, "We go to school with the Grandmas and Grandpas. The other kids just have teachers."

In addition to providing more one-on-one interaction with adults for the children, the residents often share their experiences and expertise with the classes. During a unit on birds earlier in the year, for instance, Leona Alsip told the kindergartners about how she raised birds for many years. She taught the children how to care for birds and how they reproduce.

Grandma Leona said that what she loves most about being with the children is watching and listening to them. She says she learns as much from them as they do from her. "They are so interested in what they are working on, and they have their own ideas about things," she says. "It pays to listen to them."

And young children are not the only ones who can benefit from spending time with the elderly, says Newman of the University of Pittsburgh. Even students in high school and college can gain invaluable knowledge from older people. "Some of these people have real-life experiences" that some teachers and professors don't have, Newman says. In fact, members of the Key Club at Jenks High School come into the Grace Living Center classrooms each day to help the teachers and spend time with the residents.

Newman says that being around children and young people has great benefits for the elderly beyond just lifting their spirits. "The older adults regain a lot of a sense of their own capabilities and that they are worthy, and they become less needy," Newman says.

Later that December morning as the kindergarten students work in centers, Grandma Leona sits in her wheelchair a few feet away from the children. McKayla walks by and spontaneously throws her arms around Grandma Leona's neck. The woman's face softens into a sweet smile, and she tenderly kisses McKayla on the cheek. Then, as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened at all, McKayla skips off to her next project.

Preschooler Joshua Ralston, 4, inspects one of Grace Living Center's four pet lovebirds. This one is perched on the shoulder of Jimmy Thomas, a resident of the nursing home.

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PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Leona Alsip, or "Grandma Leona," 88, visits the kindergarten and preschool classrooms regularly to work with pupils such as Molly Hughes, 5.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Belle Walker, a 94-year-old Grace Living Center resident, relaxes beneath a hair dryer in the center's "Timeless" hair salon, which has built-in views of the adjacent preschool and kindergarten classrooms.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): In the background, some residents of the nursing home watch and listen as preschoolers and kindergartners sing songs. The older people are encouraged to observe or participate in classroom lessons whenever it is appropriate.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Peggy Pridgin, 97, stops for a brief chat with a youngster who is riding on the Grace Living Center's extra-wide outdoor walkway.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Ambulances are a common sight near the nursing home because they're used to transport residents to local hospitals for routine exams. But the emergency vehicles are also a reminder that death is a reality that the children here cannot be sheltered from.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Bill Smalls, also known as Grandpa Bill, visited the children almost every day and became an important part of their lives. Although he died last June, the children still talk about him.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Lena Murphy, 93, gives a hug to any preschooler or kindergartner who wants one. Here, a preschooler on a planned visit to residents' rooms gets Grandma Lena's special attention.

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