

Where Generations Connect

Walk in the door of St. Ann Center for Intergenerational Care at 8 a.m., and you're apt to run into rush hour traffic. Babies in strollers cross paths with tottering 2-year-olds and older adults using wheelchairs and walkers. Morning has begun in this unique day care in Milwaukee, where the generation gap is bridged with understanding.



The center, which brings together children, the frail elderly and adults with disabilities under one roof, is the brainchild of its founder and president, Sr. Edna Lonergan. In the early 1980s, Sr. Edna was the director of rehabilitation for her order, the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi. Alarmed by the increase in seniors living in nursing homes, she decided to offer an alternative and opened an adult day care in the basement of the sisters' motherhouse.

"My staff at that time was made up mostly of single moms," Sr. Edna said. When schools were closed or babysitters canceled, "I lost all my staff." Her solution: "I told them, 'Bring your children in with you.'" The effect the presence of children had on the adult clients was nothing short of miraculous.

"I remember little Cathy," Sr. Edna said. The precocious 3-year-old came to work with her mom regularly. "One day, I noticed Frank, one of our clients, was showing symptoms of a grand mal

seizure starting. Without prompting, Cathy climbed on his lap and hugged him. All Frank’s symptoms subsided. That’s when I decided if I ever built a new center, it would be intergenerational.”



Sr. Edna did just that in 1999, when St. Ann Center’s Stein Campus opened on Milwaukee’s south side. The center was so successful, a second one was opened in 2015—the \$26 million Bucyrus Campus. Located in one of the city’s most troubled and underserved neighborhoods, the facility sprawls out across two city blocks that had been a vacant lot for close to five decades. Besides bringing educational and health services to an average of 387 adults and 300 children, the center will create a projected 200 new jobs in a community desperate for family-supporting employment.

Inside the 80,000-square-foot facility, an African-inspired motif honors the cultural heritage of the community. The reception desk is accented with woven African baskets and bright fabrics Sr. Edna brought back from a mission trip to Cameroon. Donated oil paintings by artists from the Republic of Congo are scattered across the walls, depicting village scenes and the African savannah. Tin-roof awnings hang over interior windows, earth-red walls mimic Cameroonian clay and colorful cloths hang from the ceiling. The decor exudes energy, optimism and hospitality — all of which reflect St. Ann Center’s approach to intergenerational care.

“The children who come here have gifts, and our adult clients have gifts, too,” Sr. Edna said. “When they come together, they give their gifts to one another.” On any given day, you’ll find 2-year-olds from the Meerkat Room listening to grandmotherly clients reading stories, or 4-year-olds from the Zebra Room sharing a microphone with their adult friends during intergenerational karaoke. “The children make the adults smile, and the adults give the children positive attention,” Sr. Edna said. “Everybody needs a sense of purpose.”

The first floor of the building consolidates childcare classroom on the west side and adult day care on the east side. Sometimes, children visit the adult units—all the baby cribs are portable, with Plexiglas sides that allow the clients to peek in at the babies. Other times, everyone meets in the middle—in the Intergenerational Park, a sun-splashed atrium with a two-story high vaulted ceiling. Adults and kids get together here frequently to enjoy special entertainment and to play games.



“I love the story of the child who was playing dominoes with an older adult who had cognitive delays,” Sr. Edna said. “A volunteer who had seen them playing later took the boy aside and said, ‘You must win every game.’ The boy shook his head and answered, ‘No. I always make sure *he* wins.’ What a lesson that child has learned! That winning is oftentimes allowing other people to win.”

St. Ann Center's adult day services include whirlpool baths, massage, physical and occupational therapy, art and music therapy and more. Many services are available to the general public. The Bucyrus Campus medical clinic provides low-cost health care to a community with the highest stroke and cancer rates in Milwaukee County. The campus also houses a unique dental clinic designed to exclusively treat children and adults with disabilities. This clinic draws patients from across Wisconsin, many of whom haven't seen a dentist in decades, if ever.

"I'm a firm believer that if you put an idea out there and God wants it to happen, it will," Sr. Edna said. Some of her latest ideas include an aquatics center with an indoor swimming pool, a state-of-the-art dementia care wing, a nine-bedroom overnight respite unit and a 350-seat community band shell surrounded by tree-lined walking paths—all scheduled for construction at the Bucyrus Campus before the end of the year.

It's not hard to find advocates for St. Ann Center's intergenerational model. Dearotha, a congenial 68-year-old in the early stages of dementia, is quick to admit, "I love having the kids around!" A client at the Bucyrus Campus, she's usually game for anything the preschoolers suggest. "I thought I might be too old," she said softly. "But those babies showed me I can still play kickball.



Studies show children in intergenerational programs like St. Ann Center's are 11 months ahead of their peers academically and socially by the time they start kindergarten. Julie, the mother of 4-year-old Lucy, who's enrolled at the center, told about the evening they stopped at McDonald's for dinner. An elderly couple was seated in the booth across from them. The man had obvious signs of Parkinson's disease.

Catching his eye, Lucy smiled, went over to the couple, introduced herself and shook their hands. Before they left, the woman came over to talk to Julie. "So many children are afraid of my husband because of his shaking," she said. "How is it your daughter came over to us?" Julie told them about St. Ann Center and the many friends Lucy has made there—included people with Parkinson's.

"To educate our children properly, we need to expose them early on to diversity," Sr. Edna said, pointing out the wide range of ages, abilities and cultural backgrounds that make up St. Ann Center's fabric. "Our children develop a love for difference, and they quickly become comfortable in this very diverse world.

"There are a lot of things I wish I were exposed to as a child," Sr. Edna said of her upbringing in Braintree, Massachusetts, in a neighborhood full of Irish Catholics. "I always say the north side of Milwaukee has been my greatest blessing. I've been exposed to the richness of a culture that I knew very little about. Everyone's been very warm, accepting and patient with me. I'm still learning every day the beauty of difference."

Last summer, St. Ann Center co-hosted the Global Intergenerational Conference, along with advocacy organization Generations United. Sr. Edna led a summit on how to replicate her all-ages day care model which drew attendees from 12 different countries. "It's what people want—a place where children grow up and adults grow older in the best way possible—together," she said with a smile. "I'd like to see a St. Ann Center on every corner."

By Sharon Salz and Elaine Burke

