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ONEgeneration bonds children with elderly suffering dementia, and both thrive

It's all smiles as seniors with dementia join young people in a program designed to create empathy and respect



It's all smiles as seniors living with dementia gather with young people in a program designed to bring about empathy and respect.

At ONEgeneration, a non-profit that brings seniors and preschoolers together for activities, has a Van Nuys campus that includes both an adult daycare program and a preschool childcare center.



Floyd, 84, greets 3-year-old Jacob as a preschool class and their teachers join seniors for intergenerational music at ONEgeneration in Van Nuys. (Photo by Sarah Reingewirtz, Los Angeles Daily News/SCNG)

Intergenerational program assistant Laura Cicinelli has worked at ONEgeneration for 21 years and grew up without grandparents. She said, “I love the concept. ... The children grow up with respect of elders.”

Weekly music time is especially popular with both generations. Groups of preschoolers enter the patio with their preschool teachers, singing “Hello Neighbors,” then they stop to say hello to the seated seniors. Music teacher Franck “Mister B” Bensoussan strums his guitar and shakes the bells on his leg ring, and the music ends with the song, “Good-bye Neighbors.”

“Maternal and paternal instincts kick in,” says Anastasia Plyugina, program director, of her clients. “A lot of them don’t have grandkids and are lonely.”



Joseph, 89, and 4-year-old Piper play together with kinetic sand at ONEgeneration in Van Nuys. (Photo by Sarah Reingewirtz, Los Angeles Daily News/SCNG)

Julyana Marquez, intergenerational program specialist at the center, said her children attend the preschool, and it “brings them closer to a different generation, showing them compassion and how to share.” At the same time, seniors get a “sense of accomplishment in their day,” said Marquez.



Julyana Marquez, intergenerational program specialist at ONEgeneration, leads Isabel, 76, reflected in a mirror, to the childcare center to spend time with infants. (Photo by Sarah Reingewirtz, Los Angeles Daily News/SCNG)

Holding hands arm in arm, Marquez walked with 76-year-old Isabel to bond with infants at the childcare center. The senior sang songs and read books while holding 6-month-old babies.

“That was really nice cuddle time,” said Isabel, who raised three boys. As they walked to the next activity arm in arm, she said, “I never had little girls, I had sluggers.”



Judy, 77, shows Nahomi, 17, of Zane Grey Continuation High School, photos of her grandson at Berkeley during a Sages & Seekers weekly meeting at ONEgeneration in Reseda. “They get to hear these really cool stories they would not have had access to,” says Josie Torres, their English teacher who said she sees growth from the students who volunteer for the intergenerational program. (Photo by Sarah Reingewirtz, Los Angeles Daily News/SCNG)

At ONEgeneration in Reseda, a traditional senior center bustling with activities, ONEgeneration has a program called Sages & Seekers that matches seniors with high school students. Each semester begins with a speed dating session to find the right partners.

Josie Torres, an English teacher at Zane Grey Continuation High School in Reseda, walks her students to ONEgeneration for a weekly meeting with elders. During the walk, she and her students cross over the Los

Angeles River, which she sees as a metaphoric bridge in their weekly meeting with elders.



Floyd, 84, Joseph, 89, Joseph, 77, and Ana Maria, 81, join preschoolers and their teachers during intergenerational music at ONEgeneration in Van Nuys. (Photo by Sarah Reingewirtz, Los Angeles Daily News/SCNG)

“They get to hear these really cool stories they would not have had access to,” said Torres, who sees growth from the students who volunteer for the intergenerational program. Torres says of 18-year-old Diego — who was in deep discussion with 83-year-old John — he was a shy kid who never said a word before volunteering with the program. And now, Torres said Diego is leading a mental health awareness club on campus and is in a second session spending time with seniors.

Back in Van Nuys, Plyugina says of her seniors with dementia, “When they leave here they are smiling.”



Adult daycare client Isabel, 76, cuddles 6-month-old Valeria at the childcare center during bonding time at ONEgeneration in Van Nuys. “That was really nice cuddle time,” says Isabel who said she raised three boys. “I never had little girls I had slugers.” (Photo by Sarah Reingewirtz, Los Angeles Daily News/SCNG)