



Photos by Bonnie G. Vculek

Visits with grandpa and grandma

Nursing home houses preschool program

By Robert Barron

An uncommon mixture seems to be working well in Enid, where a school program for 4-year-olds is taking place at The Commons, a United Methodist-related nursing home. Both the children and the residents are experiencing love from people outside their families, making a richer life for all.

“With all the benefits of the program, including an Enid

Public Schools teacher, this unique collaboration allows students to have ‘grandma and grandpa’ buddies. The program is made possible through a partnership that includes Enid Schools, Smart Start of Northwest Oklahoma, The Commons Retirement Center, and

the Inasmuch Foundation,” said Amber Fitzgerald, public information director for Enid schools.

Nursing home residents come to the preschool classroom and volunteer their time to help students learn. They assist with reading and small-group instruction. They play games together and share stories. A group of students also regularly visits residents unable to come to the classroom.

Every school morning, the students gather in the lobby of The Commons and parade to their classroom. Their “grandma and grandpa” friends often meet them to say good morning. The children’s playground, positioned in the building’s courtyard, is visible from the dining room, so residents at lunch can watch the students at play. And the preschool classroom shares a windowed wall with the seniors’ activity room.

The Commons hosted a Halloween carnival for the students and their families, and the children and residents have performed together in two holiday concerts.

The seniors have found additional ways to enrich the lives of the preschoolers. They provide goody bags of activities to sick children who have to miss school. They help make school lessons extra-special; as an example, they made gelatin molds for students when the children were learning about shapes.

Brenda Reinschmiedt, who teaches 21 students in two half-day classes, said the children work well with the older people. “They listen to the grandmas and grandpas, pay attention and respect what they tell them,” she said. At The Commons, the older generation is being given another chance to pass along its wisdom.



The program hopes to develop empathy, consideration, and caring for others by showing the students what other people are like. Some of the residents are in wheelchairs; some use oxygen tanks. Reinschmiedt said the students are learning compassion.

"It's working great. They go visit daily and, everywhere they walk, they see smiles. The residents love to see the kids," she said.

Ten years ago, a similar preschool program began in Jenks, and one operates in Kansas. In Enid, the Greenbriar Nursing Home also hosts a program.

"There should be one in every nursing home," Reinschmiedt said.

The effect on the retirement home residents has been profound, she said. One woman never left her room until the children started visiting her. At the next birthday party for a student, she asked if she could attend.

"The program is successful. When the grandmas and grandpas are here, the kids get one-on-one attention while they are playing reading or math games," Reinschmiedt said.

Gail Edmisson, the United Methodist chaplain at The Commons, said both residents and students benefit spiritually and emotionally. The children gain confidence and learn to deal with other generations.

"Our culture depends on the older people passing it on to the younger generations," Edmisson said.

Vance Air Force Base is located at Enid, and many military families live in the city. Because they are usually far away

from grandparents, those parents like having the program at the retirement home, Rev. Edmisson said. They welcome the opportunity for their children to associate with the older generation.

She said the program also creates a better life for the residents. Some have no one to visit them, and they especially love the companionship when the children are there, Edmisson said. When the children's choir sings, residents often gather and sing with them. Sometimes hymns from their childhood remain in their minds when other words fail.

"I see real joy in the adults as they wait for the kids to come out of the classroom and during their exercise time, music, and parties together," she said.

Julie Torson, recreation director at The Commons, seeks to meet residents' spiritual needs by scheduling Bible studies and worship services. She also started a Commons Chorus for the residents who want to sing.

She recently purchased a karaoke machine, programmed with hundreds of hymns. "Singing gives them a spiritual connection," she said.

Torson added, "Performance is good for the seniors because it keeps them sharp."

"These grandparents are stability to the kids," Torson said. "They see the same ones all the time. If a kid has an unstable home life, they find stability."

(Robert Barron attends Willow View UMC and is a reporter for the Enid News & Eagle.)



A resident of The Commons, in Enid, helps a preschooler practice the number "3."

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