

Old, young share in a forever lesson



WILLIAM MEYER / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Ralph Nelson watches second-grader James Zanoni, 7, work on a puzzle during a "Forever Friends" program at Hillside Elementary School in Brookfield.

Brookfield — If I didn't have this job and bills to pay, I just might head back to Sherry Power's classroom in Hillside School and try second grade all over again.

She makes it *that* inviting, her room bursting with color and creativity and energy and enthusiasm.

Then again, at the rate time flies, before too long I might end up on her elder eligibility list. I could sidle up alongside "classmates" like 76-year-old Lois Olsen, 80-year-old Betty O'Neill or 81-year-old Ralph Nelson, who spend a fair share of time with the 7- and 8-year-olds in Power's classroom.

Young and old — about 20 of each — meet at least monthly in a yearlong

program Power has been guiding through her classroom for 16 years now. It's called Forever Friends.

You think she's kidding with that name?

"Oh, I've got lots of Forever Friends," said Marion Smith, 88, who says forever means forever. She spent 12 years meeting Power's second-graders but stopped two years ago because, as she described it, "I'm getting older" and her legs gave out.

"We keep in touch," Smith said, referring to a dozen young friends stretching from elementary school to college age. They exchange greeting

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cards, visits, occasional lunches or dinners together.

"I think it's the kind of experience you have that is very hard to describe," she said. It's great fun, of course, and it's wonderful to be able to learn from each other — the old and the young."

Exactly the point.

Power, who's spent 22 of her 32 teaching years at Hillside in the Elmbrook district, is schooled in education, child psychology, family therapy, gerontology and bereavement. She holds a master's degree in education with emphasis on intergenerational issues.

Her idea of bringing old and young together for the benefit of both bloomed in a summer enrichment program years ago. Not surprisingly, she couldn't come up with a community of elders in Brookfield, a city hardly awash in senior retirement complexes. Someone connected her with St. John's Tower Apartments on Milwaukee's east side, and the fit was perfect.

Each fall, Power prepares her students for meeting older friends. They travel to St. John's for lunch and a visit, and the students pick a chair next to an elder who'll be their partner.

"It takes about 15 seconds and the conversations just flow," Power said.

During the school year, the St. John's friends will go on every field trip, visit the classroom and holiday programs, even host the students for lunch at St. John's. Outside the classroom, many families join in the friendships. In the summer, they'll come together for a picnic at St. John's.

Ralph Nelson, the newest member of the St. John's contingent, recently teamed up with a boy who was brand new to the school, James Zanoni. They talked like long-lost pals as they checked out school assignments from the China unit, worked on a puzzle and ate catered Chinese cuisine paid for by St. John's residents.

Power, generous beyond belief with her own funds, had purchased small stuffed panda bears for each participant — young and old — to top off the day.

"I had a perfectly wonderful time," Nelson said later. "They want to transfer respect for age, and gain experience that kids would get from people who have some years on them. At the same time, it gives something to us older folks to see those young kids. They give you great hope."

Power is a recent winner of the Sen. Herb Kohl scholarship for excellence, and it's easy to see why. She used her \$1,000 award — combined with donations

made in honor of a deceased Forever Friend, Barbara Rice — to buy a bronze and marble sculpture of an elderly woman on a bench reading a book to a young boy and a little girl.

"It's a perfect example of the love that can be there between the two generations," Power said. It'll be dedicated at a joint reception at St. John's later this month and eventually will be on exhibit summers at St. John's and school years at Hillside Elementary.

The death of a Forever Friend comes with the territory — three died in a month last year — but Power prepares the children.

"They handle it very well. It's a sad time, but that's just part of living. I talk to them a lot about memories, and that if we hold those memories in our heart, that person is always with us." Many of the children attend the funerals or participate in memorial services.

Power said she's developed solid friendships with the elders, too. Every three weeks she and a friend conduct a singalong at St. John's. For holidays, she prepares treat bags, mostly out of her own pocket, and delivers them to "everyone who's ever been in Forever Friends — or anyone I think just needs it." Let's give the kids their say here.

Chanti McCurtis, 7, said this of her friend, Lois Olsen, who annually presents an African study unit for the class based on her experience as a missionary nurse there for 17 years.

"She's very special to me," Chanti said. "She gives me lucky hugs."

Benjamin Jackoyo, 7, had a few words about his friend, Betty O'Neill, in the book he wrote about treasures.

"My greatest treasure is my Forever Friend because she takes trips with me and she likes me."

Power and her program turn around negative stereotypes of the elderly.

"It sounds like a cliché," she said, "but the ones who have given us our past, and the ones I'm working with every day who are truly our future, come together and make the present so much more for all of us. These youngsters are going to be our caretakers when they're older, the ones with all this responsibility. If they haven't had positive relationships with elders, they're going to look at that burden with resentment. But because of this, they'll do it with reverence and respect."

That's a pretty good lesson for second grade.

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