

Leary's Brook, Kenny's Pond seniors team up on Pen Pal initiative

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Students from Leary's Brook Junior High and residents of Kenny's Pond Seniors Home in St. John's have just completed an intergenerational initiative that saw both groups write each other as part of a pen pal project. Several Grade 6 students, that include (from left) Nassim Rajab, Esra Ewdan and Jake Murphy, sat and discussed the information they exchanged with Elaine Dunphy, 90, as part of the closing activities. - Sam McNeish

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Keeping seniors vibrant and offering youth a chance to both teach and learn from those seniors was the focus and result of a Pen Pal initiative that wrapped up Friday.

Residents at Kenny's Pond Seniors Home and students from Leary Brook Junior High got together for the special event. The seniors and students who had taken part in the pen pal project gathered for a presentation by both students and residents on what they have learned from each other in the past two months.

"When I was approached to be part of this, I thought it was an excellent idea," Stacey Hopkins Inclusive Core French teacher at Leary's Brook.

 Grade 6 students from Leary's Brook Junior High visited Kenny's Pond Seniors Home in St. John's on Friday to help cap off the inaugural intergenerational initiative that involved students and seniors becoming pen pals. Sponsored by Arts NL, the students performed dances, sang songs and recited information they learned about the residents they were paired with.

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"The students get to practise writing skills, presentation and also learned about overcoming stereotypes dispelling notions they have about seniors." She said the students get to learn a number of things about Newfoundland and Labrador such as its history from the people who lived it. She said it gave them an appreciation for their lives and the lives of the seniors.

"It was an integration of understanding among both of them," Erika Farrell, the recreation co-ordinator at Kenny's Pond said. She said the benefits to her residents are huge.

"This helps them a lot. They get lonely in here and this helps to motivate them," Farrell said.

"Most of them love to talk so this lets them tell their story and makes them feel they have a purpose."

Farrell said many of the residents are not as social as perhaps they should be and spend a great deal of time in their rooms in solitude. Being part of the pen pal initiative changed that for the most of them.

"It has made them happier and now they look forward to participating in the project. I have one man who I could hardly get off his floor, but now he is the first one to take part in the activities."

The students wrote the first letters to the residents to kick off the program. Nine residents participated. They received two or three letters each as there are upwards of 30 students taking part.

It generally would take two weeks for the letters to come to the residents and then be turned around to the students. Then the residents would tell the students about themselves and information is shared back and forth including a host of questions on a variety of topics.

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Erika Farrell, recreation co-ordinator, Kenny’s Pond

Resident Elaine Dunphy, 90, was happy to be involved in the program. Dunphy spent the majority of her life living in St. John’s where she worked in an office.

“The youth wanted to know what it was like when I went to school and things like if I had a sister, if I have any hobbies and where I was from,” she said.

“They are writing because they want to know what our lives are like. It is also nice to know about what they do, what they like and what life is like for them compared to what I lived,” she added.

And to see the students engaged with Dunphy proved the project was a huge success, as they shared stories, a few snacks and gained valuable knowledge about each other.

“It was really fun writing back and forth to each other,” student Esra Ewdan said.

“Not having the technology we do seems kind of boring, but that was how they lived,” she added.

She said it was great to be able to write her thoughts and question in just one document and not exchange countless messages like the majority of people now do through the use of smartphones.

“I learned a lot about life back then like they didn’t have the technology we have,” student Nassim Rajab said.

Family history was a big interest for another student.

“We can learn a lot about people at different ages,” student Jake Murphy said.

“We are learning a lot more stuff about how things were when she grew up and also that she has seven grandchildren and nine great-grandchildren,” he added.

Project conveners Erin Winsor and Claire Rouleau are child youth educators who have strong ties to the arts through musical backgrounds. Winsor also works with a group called Very Assertive and at the Spirit of Newfoundland.

Winsor said having the two groups interacting benefited both of them and she said the program lucked out with the solid group of students that were involved.

“Claire and I had wanted to do a program that would bring seniors and kids together,” Winsor said.

“I am not quite sure how the pen pal idea came about, but we looked at it and knew it would be a great way to get the seniors and students together.”

Winsor said getting funding through Arts NL and then putting the program together couldn’t be better and she is already looking forward to getting it back for next year.

“If we can find additional funding, we are open to doing this again, with students at Leary’s Brook and other homes if we can,” she said.
“It would be great to expand it as big as we can, for as long as we can.”

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