

features

# Young and Old Alike

A local non-profit is bridging the generational gap by bringing folks of all ages together through the arts.

*By Linda Browne*



## *We're living through a time*

of great technological change. And while it's easier than ever to stay connected through email, text messages and online chats, in a lot of ways we're more disconnected than ever as we spend more and more time on our devices, which can leave us feeling isolated and lonely. It's a feeling which, unfortunately, many seniors know all too well.

But students at Leary's Brook Junior High in St. John's are bucking the trend by using an old school way to forge new connections with senior citizens in their community.



*All photo courtesy Old School Intergenerational Projects*



Over the past four years, the Grade 6 classes have been exchanging letters and enjoying face-to-face meet and greets (or virtual meet-ups during the pandemic) with seniors living in several different retirement homes or long-term care facilities in the city. Made possible through funding from ArtsNL's ArtsSmarts program, the Pen Pal Project kicked off in 2018 by pairing students with seniors at Kenny's Pond Retirement Residence.

"I think it's had a tremendous impact," says Stacey Hopkins, teacher librarian/student success teacher at Leary's Brook, who has helped organize the project. "We have a very diverse population and a lot of our students don't necessarily have grandparents who are living, or who live in this country, and so they don't have many intergenerational connections. So the opportunity to connect with a senior, to hear their story and get to know them, has been a real learning experience for our students," she says.

"And they enjoy asking questions, like comparing music that the seniors like to listen to... to music they like to listen to, or what were their hobbies as children compared to what our students' hobbies are. So they really got to see kind of how our culture has evolved over time."

Besides helping them build empathy, Stacey adds, the project has given her students the chance to be teachers as well.

"The face of Newfoundland and Labrador, the population, has changed. So when they see some of our students – we have a lot of students who were born in Syria or Afghanistan or the Philippines – there's a great cultural exchange there. I've watched conversations they've had with them about Eid, because a lot of our students celebrate Eid. And of course, for a lot of the seniors, that wasn't necessarily part of Newfoundland and Labrador culture growing up... So seeing those cultures and that intersectionality build has been huge."



The Pen Pal Project was created by Erin Winsor (right) and Claire Rouleau, co-founders of Old School Intergenerational Projects

### Breaking down barriers

The Pen Pal Project is just one of the initiatives of Old School Intergenerational Projects – a local, not-for-profit charitable organization that aims to build connections, empathy and understanding between the generations through the arts. Founded by Erin Winsor and Claire Rouleau, who met while training together in the Music Theatre Performance Program at Sheridan College in Ontario, the organization combines their love of the arts with their passion for

bringing people of all ages together.

“We found more and more that there were purposes beyond just entertainment for the kind of skill sets that we had. And so we found that there was such great therapeutic value with children, and also with seniors, involving the arts in their lives,” says Claire, who also works as a child and youth care worker with Key Assets Newfoundland and Labrador. (Erin, meanwhile, is the music coordinator at Chancellor Park long-term care home in St. John’s.)



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While the organization is only a few years old, it's growing by leaps and bounds. The second Pen Pal Project in 2019, for instance, saw four times the number of participants, Claire says, and next year, they plan to include eight classes and eight retirement homes.

To help ease some of the isolation during the pandemic, the duo also launched Telephone Tunes, an ongoing program that collects musical requests from seniors and arranges local singers to call them and perform over the phone.

"It was a really cool way for us to reach out to our pals in the performing arts community and get them involved. They found it really rewarding, too, to have a chat with the person that they called and sing to them. And everyone who was

called was so touched at how personal it was," Claire says.

Since then, they've also launched the Reminiscence Project, which uses older objects, music, photos and text to help seniors recall memories and stories from their lives. These recollections are then passed on to youth (with the seniors' permission) through social media, or included as part of their social studies content.

### **Getting things rolling**

Not ones to slow down, the Old School team is picking up steam as they take on perhaps their biggest project yet: the retrofit of a 2008 Bluebird school bus, which will allow them to take their programming and resources on the road across the province. The bus, which will be fully accessible, was purchased from City



**The Old School team will be hitting the road in a converted school bus, bringing their programs to more seniors across the province.**

Wide Taxi (with funding from the federal government’s New Horizons for Seniors Program), who Erin says has been instrumental in helping them ensure the safety of the vehicle. They’ve also received funding from New Horizons and Come Home 2022 for a special project where they’ll take the bus outside the city to show people how to incorporate intergenerational activities into their own communities.

“It will very much be kind of like a travelling classroom, a travelling arts

studio,” Claire says. “It’s going to be very flexible in the way that furniture and things are arranged, so that it can serve a bunch of different purposes and will give us a space to do all the work we want to do, wherever we happen to be.”

Part of the New Horizons funding is also going towards the creation of a theatre experience called “By the Sea” (being thoughtfully designed for people living with dementia, but is for everyone), which they’ve workshopped with several retirement

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homes in St. John's. "So there's no language or narrative in the show. It's kind of like a sensory, experiential, participatory performance," Claire explains.

"First Light worked with us on that as well. We did a workshop with them, and then they helped us out with one of the tracks that we're using. They did some throat singing for us, which is pretty amazing. So we get to use that in our show as well," Erin adds. "The whole idea is that Old School is very inclusive, that everybody can participate in everything."

While it's a lot of work running an organization like this, the feedback they've received from participants, especially those who've taken part in the Pen Pal Project, makes it all worthwhile.

"There was a lady who said, 'I'm not Kathy the patient anymore, I felt like I was Kathy the teacher again?...

that's what hits me the most I think," Erin says. "And that's something that was cool with the pen pals as well – we do workshops in the classroom and we talk about the... mental and physical challenges of aging. And it was interesting to see how compassionate the children were when they met their pen pals, after learning this information."

For Stacey Hopkins' students, it's obvious that the impacts of the Pen Pal Project have stayed with them long after their letters have been sent.

"It's been so valuable. Now when Claire and Erin come in, our Grade 9 students are like, 'Oh, I remember when we did that!'" Stacey says. "It's learning that sticks." 📧

*To keep up with Old School Inter-generational Projects, or donate to their programming, visit them online at [www.oldschoolipnl.com](http://www.oldschoolipnl.com).*