

Building Bridge to Memories

6th graders buddy up with those in early stages of Alzheimer's

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Alice Mitchell and Madison Wagner are buddies, even though one has never used e-mail and the other can't imagine life without it.

Mitchell, a resident at a skilled nursing facility in Lincolnshire, is in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease, while Madison, 11, is in 6th grade at Highland Park's Elm Place Middle School.

It wouldn't appear the two have much in common, yet on a recent weekday they talked and giggled like old friends when adding sprinkles to a Christmas tree-shaped cookie already smothered in green frosting.

"It's really festive now," Madison said. "It's really fun to show our creative side."

Madison is one of nine Elm Place students who volunteered for a 12-week program known as the Chicagoland Memory Bridge Initiative.

In the program's first eight weeks, the students learned about Alzheimer's and how to bridge the potential communication gap between themselves and the older adults.

When the classroom segment concludes, the students make four trips to the skilled nursing facilities, known as the Wealshire and the Ponds, where the seniors live.

The buddies also write letters.

"It keeps the brain working," said Kate Lindsay, the initiative's educational outreach coordinator. "When they're forming connections, it keeps those neurons firing and slows down the symptoms of this disease."

On a recent visit, conversations sparkled from every table, with the younger buddies talking about everything from their pets to whether they help their parents at home.

"I love her," Ann Langer, 82, said about her buddy, Jori Horberg, 12. "From the first moment I saw her, I saw that this young lady was so smart with things. She has a beautiful, wonderful personality."

Students are taught techniques to improve their listening and conversation-starting skills, which help an Alzheimer's patient "feel like a person again," Lindsay said.

The Memory Bridge Initiative, now in its second year, partners students at 12 Chicago-area schools with seniors suffering from Alzheimer's, dementia and other memory loss. This spring, the state-funded project will expand to 18 schools.

"It's an excellent program," said Alice Lundquist, the Ponds' aquatic and recreational fitness director. "The interaction and communication between them is awesome."

Vanessa Przybyla, an Elm Place social worker, marveled at how some of her students are shy at first but eventually open up to their much-older buddies.

"They're taking a journey into the mind of someone who has Alzheimer's," she said. "I don't think the kids realize the benefit. They do it because it's fun."

Fun seemed to be what Mitchell and Madison were having, as the buddies spoke about Mitchell's husband, a former heavyweight boxer, and how Madison's Portuguese water dog enjoyed fetching tennis balls that she hurled into Lake Michigan.

"I like visiting and talking to her," Madison said.

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