

DeerfieldReview

Sixth-Graders Take Part in Memory Bridge Program

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By [JULIE MURPHY](#) | STAFF WRITER

Creating memories. Preserving memories. That's what happens when students buddy up with those who suffer from Alzheimer's disease and other related dementia.

Sixth-grade students from Elm Place Middle School in Highland Park are in the midst of a 12-week program called Chicagoland Memory Bridge Initiative in which they develop relationships with residents of The Ponds in Lincolnshire as they learn about Alzheimer's and its effects.

Kate Lindsay, educational outreach coordinator with Memory Bridge, said most of the schools that participate in Memory Bridge are high schools, and that the program with Elm Place Middle School is unique because of the age of the students.

"The students have to be completely committed for these 12 weeks," said Lindsay. "They have to come to every class and attend each of the four buddy meetings. It is unusual to have kids of this age make that commitment."

Each of the nine students - Jori Horberg, Madison Wagner, Yolanda Mejia, Rosalba Pereira, Maly Gonzalez, Jesse Garcia, Jimmy Teliz, Barry Rubenstein and Alberto Chavez - are paired with one resident from The Ponds. Students learn memory triggers and how to communicate with their buddies.

Alzheimer patients lose their short-term memories first, said Lindsay. Deeply held memories, childhood memories, are the ones they retain the most.

Jori asked her buddy Ann Langer if she lit menorah candles this year. "I have a menorah," said Langer. "But I haven't lit candles."

Jori brought homemade cake for Langer.

The goal of both gestures was to trigger memories and to find out personal information for the program's final project, called "The Buddy Project," a scrapbook, life story or photo album to be presented at the last meeting.

"She baked. I have cake," said Langer. "That is so sweet of her. I knew right when I met her that she has a loveliness about her."

Jori responded in kind.

"It's so much fun to be here with you. I'm lucky you are my buddy," she said.

Vanessa Przybyla, Elm Place Middle School social worker, said this is the second year sixth-grade students have participated in Memory Bridge, which is an after-school extracurricular program. Students are invited to participate.

"I asked the teachers who know the whole student body for names of kids who are kind, responsible, respectful and empathetic," said Przybyla. "About 25 names came up, and they all took applications, but only nine were able to commit."

Jesse said his sister participated last year.

"I wanted to do it because it looked like fun," he said. "It's a good thing to do."

He said he enjoys the activities that are part of the program such as writing letters and making cards, and prefers those that are done with the buddies - making ice cream sundaes and decorating holiday cookies.

"I enjoyed doing the decorations, too," said Art Atkinson, Jesse's buddy. "He's a nice young boy and I enjoy sitting with him."

Jesse said it is frightening to him that people can lose their memories.

"I think that is kind of scary," he said. "But what you have to remember is that these are just regular people who lost their memory. That doesn't mean we should judge them."

Lindsay said while Alzheimer patients can forget the day-to-day of their current lives, they often remember special events like buddy visits.

Langer said she wants to hang on to the memory of Jori's cake.

"I'll try to keep it forever," she said to Jori. "We'll celebrate."

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