

For the Young and Old, Lessons on Life, Death

After-School Program Puts Two Generations in Touch

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Third-grader Xavier Romero sat at a small table in a dining room at The Fairfax retirement community, patiently gluing tiny buttons on a heart-shaped valentine pin. The wooden pin, outlined in white eyelet lace, was a gift-in-the-making for Mary Tredway, 75, who sat next to him, praising his meticulous artistry. Xavier beamed.

Down the hall, classmate Lindsey Hellmuth was riding a different emotional wave.

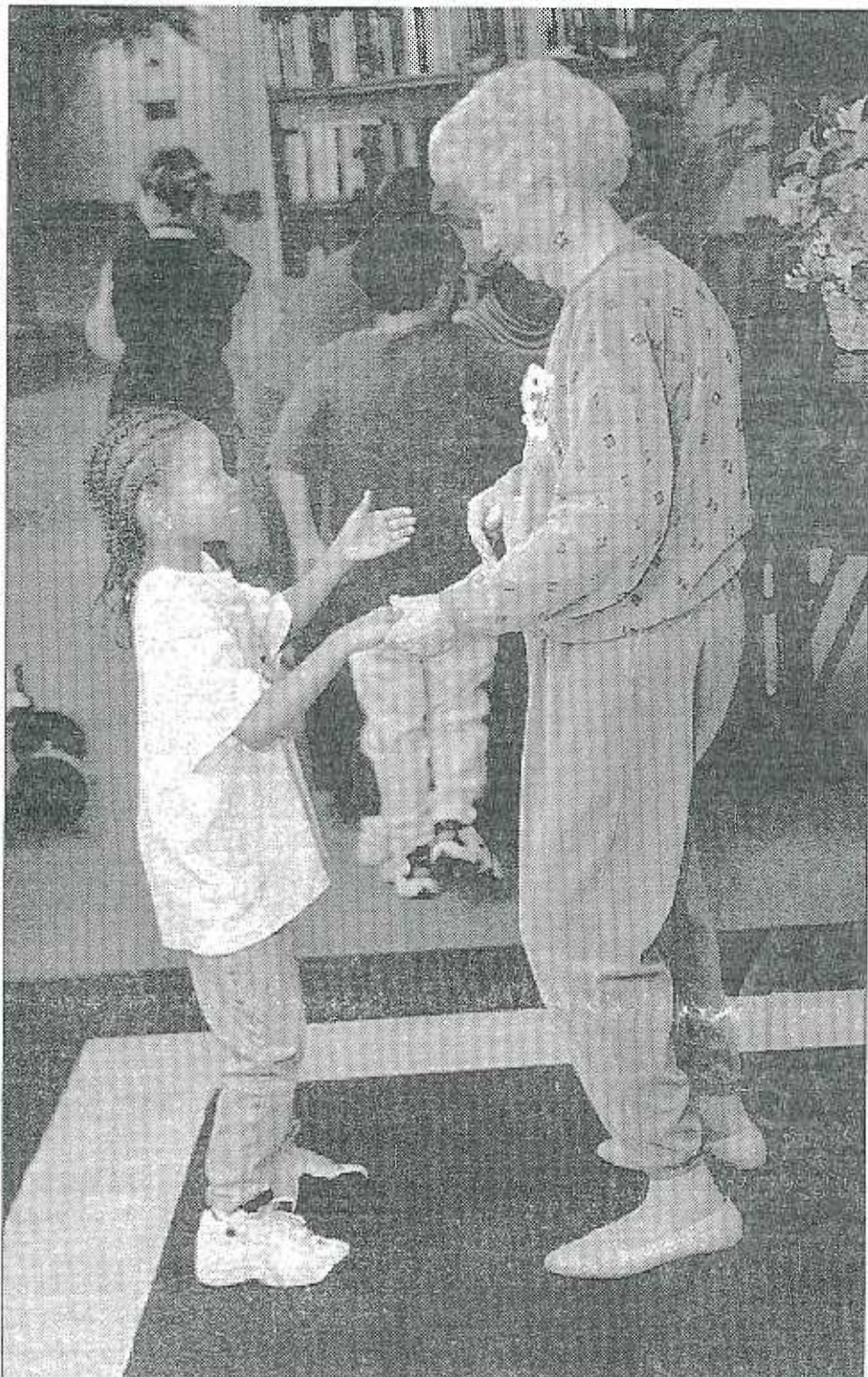
Lindsey, 8, had hoped her special friend, 85-year-old Evelyn Kluge, would be well enough Thursday afternoon to come make

a valentine pin with her. Instead, Kluge, whom Lindsey had taken to calling "my adopted grandmother," was in bed in her room, seriously ill. Lindsey said she wanted to go see her.

Kluge, propped up on pillows and struggling to speak, took note of Lindsey's colorful blouse, which the little girl had worn just for her. "You look pretty," she said. "Thank you," Lindsey replied softly, her small fingers reaching out for Kluge's. The young child looked into the old woman's eyes, the two of them holding hands as quiet seconds passed.

After a few minutes, Lindsey rejoined her classmates, who by now were sharing

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PHOTOS BY JAMES A. PARCELL—THE WASHINGTON POST

Sonia Barksdale, 8, dances with Ellie Hughes, 79, at The Fairfax retirement community during the after-school program for third-graders from Washington Mill Elementary School.



Xavier Romero, 9, paints a tiny heart for Mary Tredway, 75. Third-grade students from Glenna Orr's class at Washington Mill visit The Fairfax for 75 minutes every other week.

cookies with the other seniors. Needing some time to herself, Lindsey sat off to one side, making a heart pin for Kluge.

The after-school program that twice a month brings Xavier, Lindsey and other third-graders from Glenna Orr's class at Washington Mill Elementary School to the assisted-living wing at The Fairfax near Fort Belvoir has a dry, clinical name: Orr calls it an "intergenerational partnership." Her students' parents call it the cycle of life.

For 75 minutes every other week, Orr and her students—eight or nine get to go each time—mingle with the residents. They do crafts, sing songs, play the Steinway in the lobby, dance, laugh and swap stories.

"I just like kids. They're refreshing," said retired Air Force Col. Raymond J. Higgins, 89, explaining why he and Charley, his toy cheetah, never miss a session. "They're interested in everything. I start the conversation, get 'em unwound and let 'em loose with their imaginations."

Sonia Barksdale, 8, likes coming to The Fairfax "because the people are special. They make you feel good inside," she said.

On a recent visit, Grant Loth, 8, and Tredway were fashioning a snowman from construction paper and cotton balls. "Now, you look at that critically and tell me if you think it needs any changes," Tredway said. "No, no changes," the boy replied. "Good," Tredway said.

On another visit, with Fairfax resident Jean Palmer at the piano, Ellie Hughes motioned to Brett Robinson, 10, to join her on the dance floor. He willingly complied and soon was twirling, with Fred Astaire grace, under Hughes's outstretched arms.

At both ends of the generational divide, the benefits of the children's visits are palpable, those involved say, particularly in a highly mobile area such as Washington where grandchildren or grandparents often live hundreds of miles away.

"There is something very touching, in terms of a mutual vulnerability, between the very young and the very old and how relationships between them develop," said Irene B. Krebs, a family therapist in Vienna. "For older people, it gives them the opportunity to access skills they used years ago, such as caretaking, mothering, fathering. It's very rejuvenating. And if they don't have a lot of family around, hugging, or having a child lean on them, is comforting."

The children gain a sense of competence plus the experience of bridging generations, Krebs said. "Kids can be afraid of aging, and they're still working on the notion of death and what that means," she said. "Here they have an opportunity to see people who may be disabled in some way but who are still coping."

Olga Soehngen, activities services director at The Fairfax, a 55-acre complex designed for retired military officers and spouses, said the children's visits help residents relate to the outside world.

"They feel like they're imparting their knowledge," Soehngen said. "And the kids just soak it up. After a while, they don't look at [the seniors] as being old and frail anymore. They get beyond the walkers and the wheelchairs."

Orr began the program 12 years ago at a Department of Defense school in Germany. She has since

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—fifth-grader Crystal Prigmore

modified it at other teaching posts, including Panama, where her students regularly visited a center for the elderly that was home to about a dozen lepers, and Florida, where her fifth-graders worked with disabled seniors.

As word of the program has spread at Washington Mill, near Mount Vernon, some parents have lobbied to get their children into Orr's class.

PTA President Joan Knetemann was one. "It had tremendous importance for me," said Knetemann, whose son Michael is in third grade. "It's important for children to interact and deal with older people. My kids get a lot. For instance, Michael is on a ski trip right now. So this program is one way he can give back to other people. Starting at a young age, he'll know this is something we do—we take care of our elderly."

Orr, who said the program has roots in her own large extended family, said she wants her students to realize that "the gift of giving is precious. They're learning something from another part of society and learning to deal with people's limitations. Hopefully, as they grow older, they'll remember the worthiness of volunteering."

Orr has adapted the program to include students as young as those in kindergarten, but she said her third-graders "are the perfect age for this. They're there. They're enjoying. They're perfectly content to listen to old stories. They don't make critical judgments."

Kristi Hellmuth, Lindsey's mother, said the experience has been a "hands-on, continuing classroom" for her daughter. "These kids are learning so much about life," she said.

Children who develop special bonds with some of the seniors are invited back in subsequent years. Crystal Prigmore is in fifth grade and has been coming to The Fairfax off and on for three years. A few months ago, her friend, Bianca Zwart, who attended the same church as Crystal, died.

"I was real sad," the girl said. "At church, I'd always try to sit by her because nobody was there with her. When she died, I cried. A lady at my church, a close friend of hers, she told me not to cry, that Bianca wanted to be with her husband, Casey."

Even though her friend is gone, Crystal still likes to visit The Fairfax. "I think they're glad we come," she said. "We make them feel better. And they give us cookies and hugs."

On Friday, the day after Lindsey's visit to Kluge's bedside, the 8-year-old came to school "kind of shaky," her teacher said. Later, she broke down sobbing, and several of her friends rushed to comfort her.

"Evelyn [Kluge] made a big impact on everyone because she's such a sweet soul," Orr said. So the class decided to send her a gift—a large pastel artwork of an angel—which all the students signed.

Hugging Lindsey, Orr told her: "We have something very special to give Miss Evelyn in celebration of her becoming an angel."

"It's a real heartfelt thing for these kids," Orr said later, "because the next time we go visit, Miss Evelyn probably won't be there. It's going to be a real empty spot for them."

A few hours later, Lindsey's mother got a phone call. Evelyn Kluge had died.

Lindsey's teacher broke the news, although Lindsey seemed to know what was coming. "I said, 'Lindsey, Miss Evelyn's in heaven, just like that angel in the picture.' And she said, 'I know, Mrs. Orr, I know.'"

After a few tears, Orr gently steered the conversation in another direction. "Lindsey, there are others there that need us.' I was a bit emphatic about that," Orr said later. "It will be hard when we go back there, but life moves on."



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Youngsters and residents of The Fairfax retirement community make crafts during the after-school program. Raymond J. Higgins is at left, with Brett Robinson, Jordan Hellmutch, Ellie Hughes, Brenda Valencia and Sonia Barksdale.

Program Closes a Generational Divide And Offers Some Lessons on Life, Death