

THE CONNECTION

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Bridging the gap

Teacher unites young & old
in after school projects
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J. Scott Olinstead/THE CONNECTION

BUZY HANDS: White Oaks students and Burke Lake Retirement Center residents share a project.

Teacher's project bridges gap between seniors and children

By **CHRISTINE CESTARO**

THE CONNECTION

Nestled among the trees adjacent to a Catholic church, Burke Lake Gardens Retirement Center normally serves as a peaceful sanctuary for its 112 resident senior citizens.

Not last Wednesday, though. Thanks to the efforts of White Oaks Elementary School's third grade teacher, Glenna Orr, the place was jumping.

More than 18 of her students and a few older children flocked to the complex -- bringing a wave of excitement, enthusiasm and lots of giggles to about 20 seniors who had gathered in the game room to await their arrival.

The children came to help their senior friends sew string-art apples as a craft project. The project involves threading string through numbered holes, eventually outlining the shape of an apple.

"Just look at how smart they are," said Carmen Hernandez, 77, looking out over the room filled with chattering kids.

This is not a one-time, feel-good project for Orr. She has been bringing



Frances Mills, who is visually impaired, gets help in making a string art apple from 10-year-old Erica Lynne.

her students to Burke Lake Gardens for four years now.

Every two weeks, a group travels with her after school to visit and help with various arts and crafts. Seniors, who are able, reciprocate and come to White Oaks and read stories to the students. Usually a few mothers and high school students lend a hand as

well.

Fran Mills, 71, sat at one end of the long craft table and enlisted the help of Erica Kilcoin, 10. Kilcoin stood beside Mills and served as a second pair of eyes for the senior; the two worked together for two hours.

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*Burke Lake Gardens
A Community of Givers*

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KIDS

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stitching red thread onto the pattern.

No one forces these kids to give up their afternoon. They do it by choice. All said they would rather come to Burke Lake Gardens every other Wednesday than stay home and watch television, play soccer, or spend time with their friends.

"I like helping older people and I like making crafts," said 9-year-old Megan Criste. "They smile when they do crafts."

Tiffany Knight, 8, agreed: "I'm gonna come every time because this is fun and I like it a lot and I've done it since September."

"It's a really good feeling," added Kilcoin.

As for the residents, their feelings were obvious.

Kwisook Won, a resident for eight years, held her finished apple with both arms raised above her head, shaking -- reminiscent of Sylvester Stallone as he finished running up the steps of Philadelphia's City Hall

in the movie "Rocky." She finished first.

"Gosh, these are fast people!" exclaimed Danielle Evans, 7, who struggled with an unthreaded needle.

"I used to love the connect-the-dots in the funny pages of the paper," said Gertrude Stephens, 84, as she stitched into the numbered pattern. "This reminds me of that: I did one yesterday just for fun."

Orr established the program while she taught for the Department of Defense Dependent Schools in Frankfurt, Germany. She continued the program after her family moved to Arlington. She buys all of the necessary craft supplies with her own money, but she said that the children are starting to donate as well.

As for program ideas -- "I do whatever inspires me," she said. This year, the kids and seniors made hair bows and magnets. A cornucopia project is in the works for Thanksgiving. Orr plans to have a holiday party in December at which the kids will bake goodies and sing Christmas carols for their older friends.

"There's just a wealth of knowledge on both ends that needs to be tapped," Dorothy Evans (Danielle's mother) said, "especially with the school budgets being cut."

Eileen Quinn, the administrator of Burke Lake Gardens, called the program "absolutely wonderful."

"Our residents are just full of history," she said. "The young listen to the old, and the old learn from the young what's going on. It's great for sharing ideas and interrelating with each other."

Won held up another finished apple. Everyone gasped as she sat with a huge smirk on her face.

Seated next to her was Kathy Craver, who claimed she was "39 and holding." She spent more time laughing and joking with Won and the kids than she did with the apple project.

After two and a half hours, it was time for the children to go home. Some hugged their new friends as they left. Likely, new memories were made and old memories stirred.

For all, it was a fun afternoon, one which both young and old seemed eager to repeat soon.