

# Closing the generation gap

The GrandPals Program is building understanding and mutual respect between 'oldies and youngsters'

**CANDY IRWIN**

for Crossroads This Week

'You're never too old to have fun,' is just one of the inter-generational teachings that the GrandPals Program (GPP) promotes, whether you are a 'Baby Boomer, or a member of GenX or GenY. "Come on! Let's get ready for the old people!" or words to that effect, ushered in the first session of the GPP at Erickson Elementary School (EES) this past week.

While 'ageism' is a form of discrimination - meaning that senior citizens (such as myself) can often be devalued and dismissed - I laughed out loud in spite of myself, knowing that the sunny-faced, affable student meant no real disrespect.

Then, when their truly wonderful student teacher instructed the students to pick their work bins up off the floor so as not to trip any of the volunteer GrandPals, I actually snorted! Sorry, but not sorry, I just couldn't help it!

Each GPP involves a Program Coordinator, in this case, the Manitoba Association of Senior Communities, a Community Champion, in our case the Municipality of Harrison Park (MHP) Age Friendly Initiative Committee (AFIC), a Host Teacher in each school and volunteer GrandPals - each eager to listen and learn through storytelling and friendship.

Locally, the Erickson, Onanole, and Strathclair Elementary Schools are leading the way for their Grade 5 and 6 students to ford, or wade their way across, the generational divide by engaging in conversation about topics such as home, family, learning, work, and travel.

According to the Province

of Manitoba Bureau of Statistics, "between 2018 and 2028 (we're halfway there), people aged 65 and over are expected to increase by 31 percent."

According to Doreen Stapleton, Chair of the MHP AFIC, the MHP is one of the first areas in Manitoba to become involved. Programs are currently underway in Ontario, where GrandPals began, and are starting up in neighbouring Saskatchewan.

So, while 'visiting' may seem quite a small thing, the building of understanding and mutual respect between 'oldies and youngsters' can only bode well for everyone's futures.

"The multi-week design of the program, (conducted) over several months, enables relationship-building and stronger connections between GrandPals and students."

As the substitute teacher that day, I was privileged to sit in on conversations at Erickson Elementary School while GrandPals Brenda Hodges, Kim Leganchuk, and Sharon Whitaker encouraged the participation of their group, some of whom were, initially, a little shy.

Some of the topics that eventually elicited giggles were paper maps (vs Google Maps), party line telephones (vs cell phones) and making your own fun on the farm.

(While I was supposed to be quiet and listen, I couldn't help sharing that our family used a one-minute egg timer for long-distance calls from Winnipeg to Balduur to speak to my grandma. When that timer ran out, the phone was ripped from my hands and held out to my baby brother, who often didn't have too much to say - and which



**ABOVE: Students from Mrs. Colleen Warrington's Grade 5-6 class with GrandPals Kim Leganchuk, left and Brenda Hodges. Missing from the photo are GrandPals Sharon Whitaker and Bruce McEwing.**

didn't seem fair to me as I, myself, had a lot to say!

By fostering these not only fun, but inspiring, connections, the GPP strives to reduce negative stereotypes - not just what the young think about their elders, but also what the older generation thinks about young people.

I hope you paid attention to that last line.

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