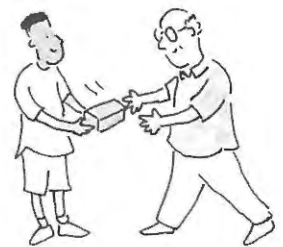


Cover Story

Bringing Generations Together

Youngsters and Seniors Reach Out To Help Each Other—and Themselves



By Andrew Carroll

Although often called the generation “gap,” what really separates the older and younger members of our society is a wall. Built up over the years with stones of fear, misunderstanding and apathy, this formidable barrier zigzags through almost every neighborhood. And for many at the opposite ends of the age spectrum, the wall just isn’t high enough.

The results of a survey of several hundred high school students and senior citizens in Miami, Florida, for example, revealed a majority of the youths interviewed felt that “seniors were a waste of time and had nothing significant to contribute.” The majority of seniors expressed “fear of young teenagers, especially black males.” Though it might be easy to dismiss these results as endemic to Miami, few would be surprised to see similar findings in other cities or just about anywhere else.

In the words of poet Robert Frost, something there is that doesn’t love a wall. In Dade County, Florida, it’s the force behind a comprehensive crime prevention effort called Bridging the Gap. Also known as the Youth and Elderly Against Crime Project, Bridging the Gap was created in September 1990 as a partnership among the Miami Police Department, Jewish Family Services and the

Andrew Carroll is the author of Golden Opportunities: A Volunteer Guide for Americans Over 50.

Dade County Public School System. The Florida Attorney General’s Office, Metropolitan Dade County Police Department and the local American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) chapter now also support the program.

Though it started with just four high schools, Bridging the Gap involves 13 schools and more than 1,500 students, half of them labeled “at risk.” After receiving extensive training on crime prevention techniques, students are matched with local senior citizens groups. Assisted by community leaders, educators and law enforcement officials, students and seniors create an anti-crime task force that studies community crime and recommends solutions. Among the results of this crimefighting partnership are better lighting in gloomy neighborhoods, a greater awareness among seniors on how to protect themselves against crime; and stiffer penalties for crimes committed in and around elderly residences.

“One of the greatest accomplishments of the program,” says Linda Brown, a Bridging the Gap supervisor, “is that, for the first time, these kids are given a voice. If you want them to have a stake in this community, you really have to involve them in making it a better place. Let them know they’re part of the process.”

Involving at-risk students, Brown believes, may even make the program more likely to succeed: “Many of the

kids involved with this program are, let's face it, tough kids. They've spent a lot of time fighting for their lives. We just direct that intensity in a more positive way. Now they can fight for someone else." The seniors, Brown adds, profit as well. "You can just see the fear melt away," she says. "They may start off a little reluctant, but soon after, they're talking with the kids, laughing together, the whole bit."

Brown also monitors the program to make sure it has a genuine impact on the students. Bridging the Gap students show a significant increase in self-esteem and respect for authority figures as well as improved grades and attendance.

Types of Programs

Foster Grandparents, the first major "documented" intergenerational effort, was established 30 years ago to encourage low-income seniors over 60 to care for at-risk and disadvantaged children. The program requires each volunteer to spend 20 hours a week with a child. In return, the senior volunteers receive a modest stipend, along with the satisfaction of caring for children often starving for comfort and attention.

Foster Grandparents Program is an example of the first of three intergenerational models. In this care-giver model, one generation is the provider of care, the other is the recipient. The care givers, young or old, can benefit as much as the recipients, but in terms of direct service, one gives, the other receives.

The second intergenerational model is reciprocal. It is designed for each generation to benefit directly from the contributions of the other. An example is Language Link. Created in 1992 in the Seneca Indian Nation of New York, Language Link unites young and old in the revival and preservation of Seneca culture. Language Link matches tribal youth one to one with elders who teach them Seneca history, language and traditions.

Forbidden to speak or learn their native language by the New York State Department of Education in the early 1900s, the Seneca lost approximately 80 percent of their language in one generation. "Many of the elders worry that their culture and their language will not be carried on by the younger members of the community," says Program Director Rick Jemison. "Most importantly, the elders want the youngsters to become teachers themselves."

The young people reciprocate with countless little chores and acts of kindness, including providing transportation to the doctor's office, hauling wood for fireplaces, running errands or shoveling snow. The elders and young people come together for about 30 hours a week, 40 weeks a year.

In the third model, the two generations work side by side for the benefit of the greater

community. This includes programs like Delta Service Corps (profiled in the July-September '94 *Leadership*), which enlists young and old corps members to provide a variety of hands-on services to their communities. In almost all cases, however, efforts structured after this third model include a reciprocal element, where the two generations help each other as well. Bridging the Gap is a perfect example; the program fights crime, which benefits the whole community. The high school students are paired with seniors who serve as mentors and help the students with their studies. In return, the students assist the seniors with errands and household chores.

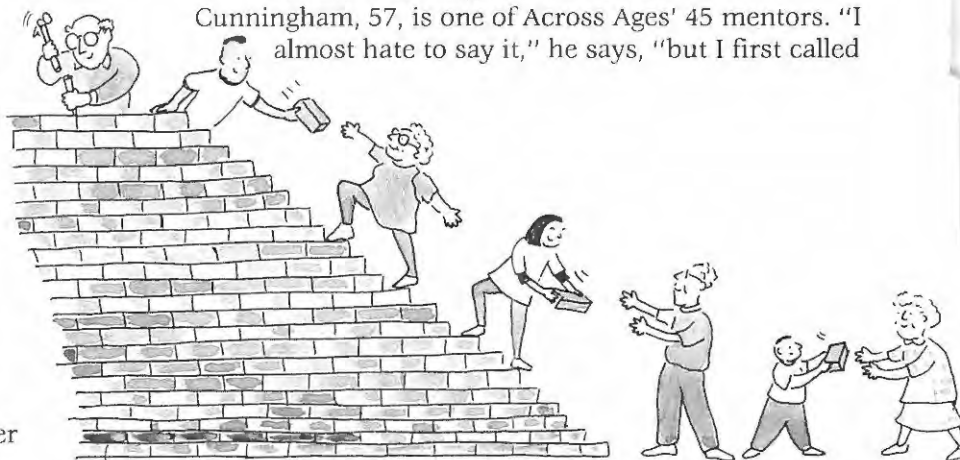
The trend in the intergenerational world seems to be toward the second and third reciprocal models. "I think we're seeing a shift now," remarks Tess Scannell, director of Generations United, "from the programs where it is simply a pleasant personal experience to programs where they are working together to solve critical social problems."

Created more than eight years ago, Generations United is a coalition of 100 national organizations working to promote "cross-generational understanding and cooperative action." The coalition is co-chaired by four national organizations that deal with youth- and senior-related issues: the Children's Defense Fund, AARP, National Council on the Aging and the Child Welfare League. Scannell, who has been with the coalition since it was established, shares what she believes is fundamental to the continuing success of the intergenerational movement: "Every person has the capacity to give, which is why we should promote each generation as a resource, and not as bundles of needs requiring care."

Dr. Andrea Taylor, director of the intergenerational program Across Ages, agrees with these sentiments and welcomes a greater focus on reciprocal programs. But Dr. Taylor is quick to emphasize the merits of the care-giver model: "It is so important for the kids to have someone there for them," Dr. Taylor says. "At the same time, you wouldn't believe how important it is for the mentors to give back to someone else, to have someone want them to be there."

Cornelius Cunningham would believe it.

Cunningham, 57, is one of Across Ages' 45 mentors. "I almost hate to say it," he says, "but I first called



Across Ages because I was looking for a job. But you know what? This is better than any job. I've been searching for the words to say how much this means to me, this program and all. The words just don't exist."

"Cornelius is not alone in feeling this way," remarks Dr. Taylor, "but it's especially inspiring to see because of his past and all." Cunningham had served 20 years, off and on, in prison. "Every time it was for fighting," he says, "fights that started mostly after I had been drinking. Then in 1987 I joined a rehab program. The grace of God sent me there, and so far so good."

"Most of the kids I see walking down the street walk with their eyes down. I know that look. I just want these kids, especially my little men, to know that if I can pull through, they can too."

Now in its fourth year, Across Ages is run by the Center for Intergenerational Learning on Temple University's campus in Philadelphia. The Center was established in 1980 to find solutions to community problems through intergenerational programs. Along with Across Ages, the Center directs several other efforts, including an intergenerational theater troupe; a literacy program that recruits college students to help adults with basic reading skills; and a job-training program for older adults interested in becoming health-care aides. The Center also serves as a clearinghouse of information on intergenerational issues and provides technical assistance to up-and-coming efforts.

Not All Fun and Games

And while the folks who participate in and those who run the intergenerational programs like to stress the positive, they are well aware of potential problems.

One essential and uncomfortable issue is liability. "You really must have an understanding, in writing, about who is—or is not—responsible if someone gets hurt," says Carol Tice. "I know it's almost unpleasant to bring up, but liability is a very important issue, and I don't hear it discussed that often." Tice is the founder and manager of Teaching-Learning Communities (T-LC), one of the country's first school-based intergenerational programs

matching school children with older volunteers. She is also president of Lifespan Resources, Inc., a nonprofit organization promoting intergenerational education, service and research.

She says that once a program and its partners get past the liability issue, thorough planning and preparation are a must, adding, "I don't want up-and-coming programs to get intimidated and feel they have to have endless training seminars or fly in someone with extensive gerontological credentials. But certainly, without some preparation and orientation, the consequences can be devastating."

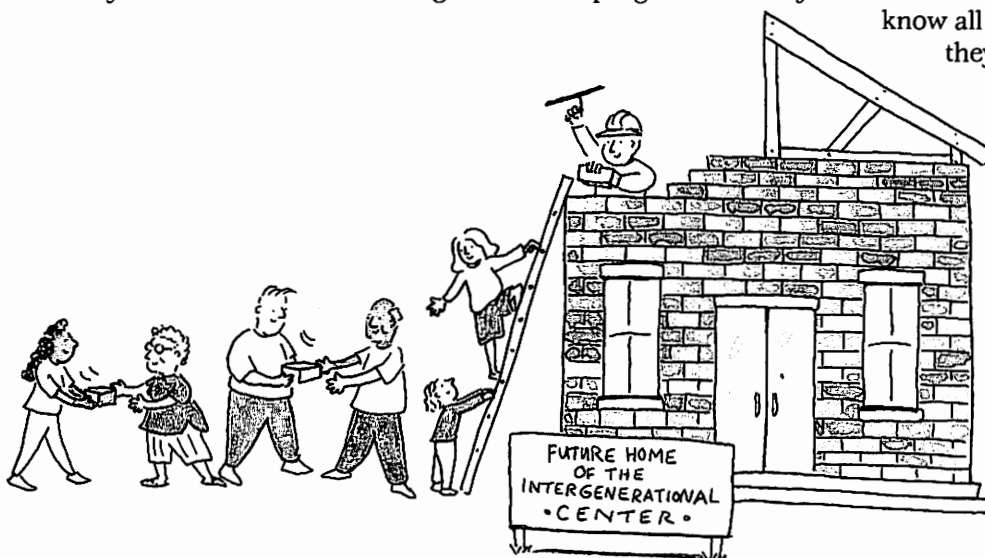
Although such experiences seem to be rare, the fear of a disastrous outcome is always there. "When we first brought the idea of Magic Me to the nursing homes and the schools, everyone thought it would be a nightmare," recalls Alfred de la Cuesta, Magic Me's executive director. "The nursing home staff thought bringing in at-risk students would be a mistake, that the kids would be unruly and would bother the seniors. At the schools, the teachers thought the kids just wouldn't go. Or, if they did, they'd hate it." Almost gleefully, he adds, "You know what? They were all wrong."

Magic Me is now one of the most well-regarded intergenerational programs in existence. Born in 1980 in Baltimore, Maryland, Magic Me brings middle-school students into nursing homes for the benefit of both the students and the residents. There are several essential components that make the program work.

"First of all, it's very important that both the kids and the seniors are enthusiastic about the program," says de la Cuesta. "We make sure they all know they're needed. We go to the seniors and say, 'Look, we've got these kids, and a lot of them are having trouble in school, and we really need you to help them with their studies.' Then we go to the kids and say, 'There are these elderly people living alone, and they'd really like to have someone come by and visit them. We need your help. How about it?' Our goal is to give each group a sense of mission. And every time, they respond beautifully."

Intense preparation comes next. "This is essential," says de la Cuesta. "We talk with the seniors and let them know all about the kids. We want to make sure they're as comfortable with the program as possible. The students receive a month-long orientation, and we're very honest with them. We tell them all about the realities of a nursing home, that there will be people who are sick, and that there may be yelling, unpleasant smells, those kind of things. This doesn't discourage them at all."

The staff at Magic Me has discovered that even the kids labeled as "troublemakers" demonstrate a remarkable compassion towards the



seniors. And for the majority of the students involved, attendance in school and grades go up, while disciplinary problems go down. "The key ingredient in all of this," de la Cuesta believes, "is a regular period of reflection. We found, after a major study, that the students who were encouraged to reflect after doing service fared much better than those who did not. Reflection really helps them absorb what they're doing, and I can't stress it enough."

Magic Me is so successful that it has received funding to expand from 33 to over 150 sites.

Breaking Barriers

Magic Me's dramatic expansion reflects an urgency in the intergenerational world that is driven by the belief that society seems to be separating the generations at a furious pace. "We are very age segregated," says Tess Scannell. "Adults work in environments almost exclusive of children under 16 and people over 65. Seniors often live in age-segregated housing, and children attend age-segregated schools." Also, in today's mobile society, grandparents rarely live nearby. Even if they did, they're probably healthier than their grandparents were and are more likely to be away running marathons or traveling around the world.

Another factor changing society is technology. Pre-recorded phone message systems, E-mail, automated bank teller machines, Walkmans and a variety of other gadgets make it possible to go through an entire day without needing to come into contact with another human being. Today's children, born into an automated world, are especially at risk of not understanding the importance of genuine person-to-person contact. Increasingly, they spend their time with hyperactive video and computer games instead of with people, including their grandparents. They are not as likely to hear the stories of their grandparents' lives as grandchildren of the past have done.

"I believe," Tice explains, "this is why you're seeing such an interest in oral histories—where young people record the experiences of older persons—as an integral part of intergenerational programs."

Cornelius Cunningham is quick to point out that many older folks also need to appreciate the importance of listening. "Kids are always having people talk at them," he says. "We need to talk with them. They want to be heard, just like everybody else. And if we don't listen to them, they'll grow up not knowing how to listen to their kids."

Although the wall separating the ages still stands, new cracks develop every day. Few who have seen the power of intergenerational programs believe the barrier can endure. Angela Roberts, program coordinator at Generations United, says almost wistfully, "You know, the wonderful reality of it all is we're social creatures. We like to be with other people, no matter how young or how old they are. When it comes right down to it, we need one another. We really do." ■



From left, Cassie Pondexter, Edward Sabinay and Euraline Morrison are participants in Bridging the Gap, Youth and Elderly Against Crime Project, Dade County, Florida.

Building a Program

Regardless of the model a budding intergenerational program hopes to emulate, its success, the experts seem to agree, requires considerable planning and cannot be left to good intentions alone. Tess Scannell elaborates: "We have to be wary of the myth of instant intergenerational magic. In reality, it takes a lot of preparation to create a program that is worthwhile and will last." In *Young and Old Serving Together*, Generations United's must-read publication on intergenerational community service, the criteria for exemplary programs include:

- Clearly defined and realistic goals
 - Strong partnerships with other community groups and organizations
 - A recruitment and selection process that promotes diversity
 - Thorough orientation and training
 - Meaningful and innovative service activities
 - Close supervision and support
 - Reflection, recognition and program evaluation
- Pinpointing the exact number of intergenerational programs is difficult, if not impossible. Although everyone may know about Foster Grandparents, Across Ages, T-LC or Magic Me, there are countless lesser-known and more informal programs throughout the country.

"When we sent out the first draft of *Young and Old Serving Together*," says Tess Scannell, "we had written that there were hundreds of these intergenerational programs nationwide. When the drafts were returned, many people had crossed this out and wrote, 'No, no, there are over a thousand!' So that's what we put. Ultimately, we hope Generations United will be able to include all these programs in our database, which now has about 350 programs."

The book can be ordered from Generations United, c/o CWLA, 440 1st St. NW, Suite 310, Washington, DC 2001-2085; cost: \$15. ■