

## 2010 Great Ideas in Aging Contest

**Sponsoring Agency:** Fairport Baptist Homes

**Initial Problem to be Addressed:** Loneliness, isolation and lack of socialization experienced by many seniors living in our community; lack of intergenerational contact in families

**Brief Program Description:** *Senior Life Stories Project*

Senior Options for Independence (SOFI), a program of Fairport Baptist Homes that offers support to seniors maintaining their independence in their own homes through assessments, connections to services and transportation, partners with a creative writing class at Our Lady of Mercy High School to implement the *Senior Life Stories Project*.

Each semester, pairs of students are assigned to a senior identified by a SOFI care manager. In a pre-interview meeting conducted by SOFI staff with the students the project is introduced, students are given insights for interacting with seniors and a brief description of the senior they will interview is provided. The students are introduced to the senior by the care manager and conduct an interview about the senior's life using questions they prepared in class. Each student then creates a presentation piece. The projects have ranged from poetry to stories to paintings. (Much to our surprise there has not been a single chronological biography.) When the projects are completed, the students, seniors and invited guests gather for a celebration during which the students present their creative pieces. The *Senior Life Stories Project* celebration is designed to allow the students and the seniors to interact. After each team of students makes their presentation, they share their thoughts and feelings about the project. The senior honored is then given the microphone and shares their thoughts about the experience. The senior is then given a "hard copy" of the presentation piece to keep. Refreshments are served and students and seniors socialize informally. There is an additional post-celebration meeting with the students to reflect on their experience and gather input to further refine the experience for the next class.

**How does the Program Help/Why do you like the Program?**

The *Senior Life Stories Project* has worked well on many levels. It is very affirming to the seniors to have students devote time and express interest in who they are and what they have done during their lives. The seniors chosen for this project are often isolated, have no nearby family and often have outlived their friends. Most are quite frail and do not have much social interaction because of that. Additionally, it is a very positive experience for the senior to have their life acknowledged before an audience. In one instance it was a great reminder to those in the audience to look beyond the worn out body when the person in the wheelchair was identified as the architect of the building the celebration was held in.

This project bridges a gap between generations. The students' stereotypical view of seniors changed as they came to view the seniors as whole persons with unique stories and vast experience. The seniors' stereotypical view of the students altered as they came to know the students as caring, creative individuals. The students remarked that the interview experience gave them greater appreciation for their own grandparents -- sometimes as a substitution for lost opportunities within their own families, sometimes helping them to alter their view of their grandparents from old person to relevant people with interesting life stories. The experience also

helped give context to some of the things they knew about their grandparents. Several students remarked that they would pay much closer attention to their grandparents and would make the effort to learn their stories. Several noted their regret that they would not have that opportunity.

The students and seniors, both initially nervous about the interview, discovered that it was an experience filled with laughter and caring. The seniors were pleasantly surprised that a young person cared enough to listen to their story. The students were surprised that the seniors made an immediate connection with them that included concern for their wellbeing. Most of the seniors had prepared refreshments and a comfortable interaction occurred. A good deal of advice from the seniors was shared with the students.

The dynamic that developed between the students and the seniors in a very short period of time was remarkable. The seniors' looked forward to seeing the students at the celebration and the students flanked their senior during the presentations. Some make plans to remain in contact. One senior wrote a poem about what the experience meant to her and shared it with her students.

### **Total Program Cost and Major Income Sources**

There was no additional cost incurred by SOFI or Our Lady of Mercy High School in running this program. However there were two important elements already in place that made it very successful and the staff time involved could be considered a program cost. The SOFI care managers spent time identifying and recruiting seniors to participate. They spent some additional time meeting with the students as a group and introducing them individually to the seniors. SOFI staff also spent a few hours in coordination of the project and in organizing the celebration. At the school's end the transportation of the students and refreshments for the celebration were supplied by the school's community service coordinator.

### **Special Issues/Characteristics**

Although we were initially concerned that the seniors may share issues from their lives that were sensitive or that the students would ask questions that made the seniors uncomfortable we have found that the students have shown great maturity and discretion. In the pre-interview meeting that SOFI staff conducts with the students we address these issues instructing the students to move on to the next question if the senior is uncomfortable. We also empower the seniors to decline to answer particular questions and to move on to other topics if they are uncomfortable.

The safety of the students is a concern to the school and their parents. The safety of the seniors who are frequently vulnerable is a concern to SOFI. In this project these concerns were mitigated by having the students interview the seniors in pairs and having the care managers introduce the students to the seniors and remain during the interview when requested to do so. The care managers however did not engage in the interview.

### **For Further Information Contact:**

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