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A MODEL FOR INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING

By Michelle Odinma



When Indiana Academy student Jesse Ncube showed up last fall to visit her assigned mentor, she didn't know what to expect. What Jesse remembers from those visits is her mentor, Shannon, suffering from congestive heart failure and bemoaning her spiritual condition.



▲ Sean Seigal with Dolores Haug

Kelly Lorenz

“She didn’t know if she’d go to Heaven,” said Jesse. As Jesse and her other classmates joined in a group Bible lesson with several of the residents, they noticed Shannon’s hunger to know more about Jesus. Jesse was more than happy to share how God saved her from a fatal car accident that killed her twin brother and father. As she listened, the patient’s faith grew. As if waiting to be at peace with her Creator, the patient died a week after deciding to follow Christ.

Jesse is one of several students at Indiana Academy participating in a program called Assist, which provides opportunities for students at Adventist academies across the U.S. to work in the community and earn money for their tuition. During scheduled times in the week, students visit with an elderly mentor, collaborating on activities they choose together. From raking leaves to baking bread, de-thorning rose bushes, and learning new languages, each mentor/mentee relationship is unique

and suited for the pair. The activities not only help the older adults with daily living and improved quality of life, but present an opportunity for students to appreciate the value of service and foster positive relationships with the elderly.

See how the students prepare to understand quality of life challenges as an elderly person.
<https://vimeo.com/322906741>



Since its beginning in 2006, Southern Adventist University's program Assist for high school students and PFE (Partnering for Eternity) for elementary students has infused approximately seven million dollars into K-12 Adventist education across North America. Currently, the Assist program is active in 42 academies, and PFE is active in 152 elementary schools.

Students are benefiting in a myriad of ways from the program. Great Lakes Adventist Academy's program director, Lorelee Mendez, says, "It's great to see the different generations connect while being able to financially help students who hang out with their mentors." She added that high schoolers have repeatedly mentioned that, even if they were not being helped with tuition costs, they would still participate because of how much they were enjoying the program.

According to Mendez, one GLAA student who struggled with his faith and spirituality found that the love of a mentor made a big difference. He discovered that God's love was more than theory — it was action. Mendez explains that the cross-generational companionship between the youth and the elderly is benefiting everyone involved. She says, "This program is a blessing to our campus."

At Indiana Academy, the program was implemented in 2012, headed by Linda Reeves. Reeves could not stop

raving about the program as she described the benefits that the boarding school students were receiving from their visits to a local nursing home. "The mentors at the nursing home get the opportunity to establish close bonds with the students, and the students can't wait to see their mentors. The mentors really miss their student companions when they aren't there. This program is teaching our kids that service is also a ministry of love and compassion, which is a very vital need."

Another bonus for the students, says Reeves, is the great preparatory experience for students who plan to work in the medical field. It is an opportunity for exposure to real-life situations students could encounter working in the fields of medicine or mental health.

Reeves went on to explain that there were other opportunities to share more love and compassion at the nursing home. For instance, opportunities for Bible study sometimes come along and, when they do, students gladly sit alongside their elderly mentors, guiding them in the study of the Scriptures. After the passing of one mentor, a student mentee came to her sobbing, saying, "I hope with all my heart that he saw Jesus in me while we visited."

At Andrews Academy, Joelle Ashley is the Assist Program coordinator where 23 students are currently involved in helping seniors citizens in the Berrien Springs community. She finds mentors through references, as well as through personal connections, and often witnesses pairings that could only have happened through the Holy Spirit.

One of those matches is 84-year-old Merna Witzel who was paired with Hannah Crownover, a freshman at the academy. "When Hannah's mother was 15," Witzel explained, "she worked with my husband at Wisconsin Academy on the dairy farm." After both families moved to Michigan, Mrs. Witzel visited Hannah's family every week.

Hannah shared how kind Mrs. Witzel was while her younger sibling was in the hospital battling a heart condition. "While my parents were in the hospital with my brother, Mrs. Witzel would bring us fresh-baked bread since everything was so busy." When Mrs. Witzel signed up with the Assist program for another year, she was assigned to Hannah, whom she did not initially realize was from the Crownover family. When she found out who



▲ Student Ayana LeBlanc is paired with mentor Lenier Henley

Jean-Irès Michel

she was, she was ecstatic. “I had no idea,” she gushed, concluding “it was Divine.”

Freshman Elena Weiss, who is paired with mentor Eva Vissani, likewise discovered that her pairing was also not by chance. Eva has family roots connected to Elena’s father. Ivonne Segui-Weiss, Elena’s mother, shared her peace about the match. “[Eva knew] her father when he was young. She knew her grandfather when he was young so, as a mom, I felt comfortable knowing that she was with someone that could teach her so much about her family and her culture. It’s really a godsend because she has another person who she can go to for good advice.”

Elena affectionately calls her mentor “Nona” and finds that the experience of spending time with Eva is teaching her each day that, “It’s the little things that matter.” Mrs. Vissani, who has a wealth of life experience and skills to share, was more than happy to tell about her time with Elena, saying, “she is like a sunbeam in my house.”

Students are learning crucial life lessons they may not experience in a classroom setting. Take, for example, Andrews Academy freshman Mitchell Meekma who discovered the value of personal relationships. He says, “Sometimes people want to have company — not to have work done for them. Sometimes they just want somebody to talk to.” Similarly, senior Abiah Newton

says the most enjoyable aspect for him was the “building of relationships that take place.”

Southern Adventist University credits the idea for this unique program to one of its donors. In the 1970s, after transitioning his elderly mother to a new home, her health began to decline as a result of a loss of companionship with friends and family. She stopped leaving the house, missing out on walks and attending church service. The story changed when an elementary-aged girl asked if she could visit with the donor’s mother for Pathfinder community service hours. Her weekly visits became one of the highlights in his mother’s week, and soon changed her experience in her new home. They talked together, went to church together, and formed a relationship that rejuvenated his mother’s spirit.

Schools are responsible for raising 30 percent of the funding, but the coordinators are in agreement that the program a win-win for everyone. Reeves says, “You find out that the older people have a lot to give to the young people and the young people have a lot to give to their elders. I just think it’s a blessing on both ends.”

For more information on the program, please visit: <https://www.southern.edu/administration/assistpfe/AboutUs.html>.

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