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A JEWEL of a Program Earns the 2011 MindAlert Award

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JEWEL (Joining Elders with Early Learners), a joint program of Family Services of Westchester and the Mount Kisco Child Care Center, is the winner of the 2011 ASA-MetLife Foundation MindAlert Award, a national award program that recognizes innovative approaches to maintaining older adults' cognitive fitness. MindAlert annually provides a way for nonprofit organizations to showcase older adult mental fitness programs that demonstrate innovative and effective application, and are accessible to diverse communities. The 2011 MindAlert award will be given on April 27 at the National Forum on Brain Health, during the 2011 Aging in America Conference in San Francisco.

It used to be that school kids would come home to a grandma eager to help with homework or maybe trounce them in a game of gin rummy. Today, with families spread across continents, many kids rarely interact with elders. The JEWEL, a joint program of Family Services of Westchester (FSW) and the Mount Kisco Child Care Center, which practically stumbled upon the immense benefits of intergenerational interaction, now sees these benefits and interactions daily.

A melding of two programs—the Mount Kisco Child Care Center and the My Second Home Adult Day program—JEWEL is housed in one 20,000-square-foot residential facility in Mount Kisco, N.Y. When the Mount Kisco Child Care Center wished to expand into its own home after renting a series of sites in dour basements, an anonymous donor offered land on which to build a new facility. When the donor came up with the idea to build one facility to accommodate both programs, a good idea was born.

MULTIGENERATIONAL MEMORIES MINE A JEWEL

Dorothy Jordan, executive director of Mount Kisco, was just beginning to learn the benefits of intergenerational activities, and was responsive to the proposal.

The more she researched the idea, the more she heard people fondly recalling their youth in multigenerational households, some of which, like Jordan's, supported a working mom. Jordan's relatives were of all ages, but they weren't necessarily healthy or engaged. Yet Jordan still enjoyed and felt their support. So she took "a leap of faith," and agreed to work with FSW on the design and development of the shared site, plus collaborate on the JEWEL program.

Today, Jordan hosts 160 kids from three months to 11 years old at Mount Kisco, and Rina Bellamy, director of My Second Home, has 90 adults, ages 60 to 97, with some level of impairment, either physical or mental, coming to My Second Home on a daily basis. Several times a day the two populations get together for joint activities, which can range from elders watching children sing, or actively helping them with painting projects.

One of the beauties of JEWEL is that parents of the children in daycare can go off to work knowing that their kids are in doubly good hands, and elders' caregivers in the My Second Home program get well-deserved res-pite. There has even been a rare occasion where a grandparent and grandchild attended at the same time. Both Bellamy and Jordan like to think of the program as a neighborhood, not a daycare center—a neighborhood that duplicates another era when families weren't so far flung.

BANISHING STEREOTYPES, BONDING GENERATIONS

New York-based Fordham University's Ravazzin Center on Aging studied participants in the JEWEL program and found that the program's preschoolers tended to view older adults more positively than a control group that had little interaction with elders. The JEWEL preschoolers also perceived the elders as healthy, "not grouchy," says Jordan. She thinks that not only is the program beneficial to both populations, but it will improve overall relations between generations as stereotypes are constantly broken down.

One preschooler reported, "I like being with [the older adults] because I can see the past in a different way when they tell me."

Bellamy says toddlers are favorites with the elder program participants, as toddlers' language skills are still emerging and they are very dependent upon adults. She has seen the joy on elders' faces when these generations get together. Bellamy observes that the older adults enjoy holding and comforting the babies—and that the moods in adults who are physically or mentally impaired can change dramatically after a quick session of "baby bonding." One caregiver agreed saying that when her parent has interacted with the children "he seems more animated when he comes home."

Another of JEWEL's daily bonding programs is Breakfast Buddies, where preschoolers are encouraged to eat meals with elders. Bellamy told the story of a diabetic older woman who just wouldn't eat. She was joined at the table by a little girl in pigtails who was also not fond of breakfast. The woman, who had grandchildren, told the youngster she should eat. The girl refused. When this elderly lady said, "Why don't you watch me?" and proceeded to polish off her own breakfast, the girl rose to the challenge and did exactly the same.

A shining facet of this program is that old and young populations have definitely formed a symbiotic relationship. "JEWEL can fulfill that need to feel needed, valued and validated," says Bellamy. ❖

Alison Biggar is a Bay-area based freelance writer and editor. For information on the MindAlert Awards, visit www.asaging.org/mindalert.