

Smiles for Seniors

Sharing the Gift of Wisdom with Youngsters

BY RABBI AVREMI POPACK



Elders have long held a cherished place in Jewish communities. After all, the Torah tells us that “Many years bring wisdom” (Iyov 32:7). This wisdom is indeed a gift, one I was fortunate to receive at a young age.

When I turned 10, I moved from my parents’ home in Denver to live with my Zayde and Bubbe in Brooklyn, to experience Jewish life that only a larger Jewish community could offer. Let me tell you, it wasn’t easy. My grandparents’ view of life was quite different. Talk about culture shock!

Looking back now, however, I can appreciate that this experience is indeed a life-transforming gift. True, I was introduced to foods no other kids had. Yet, along with the servings of chopped liver, herring and borscht, was their living example of strength and commitment that has shaped my identity. The stories they shared, the experiences and opportunities they gave me have instilled in me the recognition and value of being an active member within the Jewish community.

As I raise my family in Orange County today, it is on account of the high expectations my grandparents set for me, and the sacrifices they made to ensure their children and grandchildren experienced better, that have armed me with the importance of carrying on these Jewish values with my children. It is through

their contributions that I understand the vital role the community plays in shaping my own children’s identity as valued members of a community we cherish.

Which is why, as Hebrew Academy’s Principal of Judaic Studies, I want our students to benefit from the gift of wisdom our elders have to offer. Grandparents play an active role in their students’ learning experience here at Hebrew Academy.

Join us during our annual Intergenerational Day on campus, and you’ll see many a proud Zayde and Bubbe celebrating their grandchildren’s achievements.

We take senior engagement beyond our own families, as well. As part of our Grand S.L.A.M. (Service Learning through Active Mitzvos), students from all grades engage in a wide range of annual service learning projects involving seniors, including Holocaust survivors.

One of our programs, Smiles for Seniors, welcomes senior volunteers into the classroom to share their incredible life experiences, read stories, partake in creative activities, and even provide one-on-one tutoring. Our second graders also excitedly look forward to their yearly field trip to Bubbe & Zayde’s Place in Santa Ana. The positive impact on both our students and the seniors we connect with have been nothing short of magical.

On their last trip to Bubbe & Zayde’s Place, the



young and young-at-heart alike exchanged smiles, sang songs new and old, and read treasured storybooks together. Over the course of the afternoon visit, I saw a transformation in the faces of the senior residents as well as our students, as their shyness gave way to openness.

All were learning from each other, creating connections that spanned generations. This interaction between the children and Bubbes and Zaydes was clearly good for everyone.

Research backs this up. According to an AARP study, students who participated in service learning experiences with seniors saw improvements across a range of social-emotional skills, including personal responsibility, relationship building, decision making, goal-directed behavior, social awareness and self-management.¹ These skills translate directly to improved academic performance, while helping develop more confident, engaged and compassionate citizens in and outside the classroom.

The benefits go both ways. In a study conducted by the nonprofit organization Generations United, intergenerational volunteering was found to have a significant positive effect on seniors as well. Seniors who volunteer with youth are healthier, feel more connected and less isolated, experience less depression, and continue to stay curious and engaged in life.² It's true what they say: Being around young people helps us stay young at heart.

Introducing service learning projects with seniors

at Hebrew Academy has yielded many wonderful memories, as well as tangible results for our students and the elders who so generously share their gift of wisdom. We plan to continue growing this program and encourage our families to connect with the Bubbes and Zaydes in their lives and across their communities.

When I see the fascinated faces of our students as they listen to a Holocaust survivor share her experience of courage, resilience, hope and healing; when I see those students' expressions open with wonder and joy; I think back to that time I lived with my grandparents many years ago. I recall the shared meals and stories that closed the generational divide between us, and showed me the practical application of Jewish values of compassion, honesty, integrity and respect in my daily life.

I am thankful that the new generation of Jewish learners at Hebrew Academy has the opportunity to experience this gift as well.

To learn more about senior volunteer opportunities at Hebrew Academy, call me at (714) 898-0051. ☆

1. "Experience Corps Social-Emotional Learning Evaluation." AARP Foundation. August 30, 2019. https://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/aarp-foundation/2020/pdf/AARP_Foundation_Experience_Corp_Abt_SEL.pdf

2. "The Fun and Value of Intergenerational Programming." Senior Lifestyle. <https://www.seniorlifestyle.com/resources/blog/fun-value-intergenerational-programming/>

RABBI AVREMI POPACK IS THE PRINCIPAL OF JUDAIC STUDIES AT HEBREW ACADEMY AND A CONTRIBUTING WRITER TO KIDDISH MAGAZINE.