

Creating a sharing partnership between generations

By Margaret Barry

"This makes me feel good. It makes me want to live again", says Gerhard Friedrich about the visits he receives from two young friends.

The visits at Clover Bar Lodge take place as part of the Friends of Seniors pilot project, which unites seniors with youthful visitors.

In a pilot project inspired by a similar program in Calgary. Clover Bar Lodge in Sherwood Park has formed a warm partnership with 26 junior high students from Our Lady of Perpetual Help Catholic School.

Generally, two volunteer students are matched with a senior resident. The students visit the lodge every other Tuesday.

The visits between the generations may include activities such as working on crafts, playing cards or other games, and passing on skills such as woodworking, or simply good-old fashioned talking.

Caitlin Merrit and Kristie Erickson are Freidrich's young visitors. They say they enjoy the visits because they get to make a friend.

"I really enjoy learning about his history and his life. He was an artist and I'm interested in art." Merit adds.

The Sherwood Park Friends of Seniors project, sponsored by Petro-Canada, has been a success indicates programs co-ordinator Carol Parsons.

The program allows the seniors to mentor, share their experiences and to feel needed – not forgotten.

It also creates an atmosphere in which children, who perhaps never had a relationship with a grandparent as a result of transitory lifestyles that separate family generations, have the opportunity to get to know someone who didn't grow up with television and cell phones.



Junior high students are visiting seniors at Clover Bar Lodge in Sherwood Park as part of the Friends of Seniors program. Pictured with Howard Bunse are Alix Evans (left) and Monique Gagnon. "I have three sons and always wanted a daughter," says Bunse. "Now I have two adopted daughters."

"It's a nice way to connect with another chunk of history, another culture and generation," remarks Doug Aitkenhead, superintendent of Elk Island Catholic schools, which takes in Our Lady of Perpetual Help.

In addition to the mentoring aspects of the program, students benefit from the introduction to volunteering it provides. Parsons notes.

"They are probably getting their first volunteer experience. We want this experience to be positive. Hopefully, we are setting the groundwork for life-long volunteers."

The Friends of Seniors program has been in existence in Calgary for 10 years. It began when Brenda Wood's daughter, a Grade 7, student, complained that she had nothing to do at lunch hour. Wood then organized the first "lunch date" between St. Michael's junior high school and the nearby Carewest Sarcee care centre.

"Word got around that bringing the two generations together made sense and made everyone involved feel a little better about themselves and the world we live in." Wood reflected in a recent Friends of Seniors newsletter.

"Next year we will adopt our own name and logo." says Parsons. "We hope to expand the program to include one more school and another senior lodge. We also plan to have a bus so we can take the seniors and the students on outings."