

UNITING THE Generations



Its name says it all: Generations United works to bring the generations—and the information about the programs that help them—together.

By Brent Elrod

In a society where members of different generations are increasingly fragmented, separated, and isolated from one another, intergenerational programs work to bring people of different ages together. It's an ever-expanding field, and for 20 years, Generations United (GU) has led the way in promoting quality intergenerational programs, strategies, and public policy at the national level.

The intergenerational movement began as a component of the "war on poverty" some 40 years ago. Efforts to stem both the increasing isolation of older adults and the growing separation between young and old began to arise. Since then, the movement has developed into a more systematic effort to address social problems, especially those affecting our most vulnerable age groups: the bookend generations—children and older adults.

Generations United (GU) is the national membership organization focused solely on improving the lives of children, youth, and older people. GU represents more than 100 national, state, and local organizations and individuals who in turn represent more than 70 million Americans. Since 1986, GU has served as a resource for educating policymakers and the public about the economic, social, and personal imperatives of intergenerational cooperation. GU acts as a catalyst for stimulating collaboration between aging, children, and youth organizations, providing a forum to explore

areas of common ground while celebrating the richness of each generation.

The country's largest senior and kids' organizations founded GU in 1986 in response to a growing concern that policymakers were trying to pit young and old against one another for scarce resources. An editorial cartoon from the period shows a young boy and an older man dressed in battle fatigues, positioned back to back with pistols at their sides. The implied meaning was that the age group left standing after marking off 10 paces, turning and firing got the available dollars. Donna Butts, executive director of Generations United, notes, "We firmly believe that the unique wisdom and talents of each generation and their mutual interdependence reflect societal values that deserve strengthening—not rendering apart."

Indeed, intergenerational programs are an increasingly popular way of sharing resources by bringing young and old together through mutually beneficial exchange. Thousands of intergenerational programs have cropped up in communities across America. These programs are particularly successful because they meet numerous needs of old, young, families, and the communities in which they live. The programs operate in every kind of setting—rural, suburban, and urban—and have proven cost effective time and time again.

Typically, intergenerational programs cast members of each generation into one of two roles: service provider or service recipient. For example, in various programs, older adults tutor middle school students at risk of failing. But it also works in reverse: for example, high school students teach older adults how to explore the internet in the Computer Pals® program of Intergenerational Innovations in Seattle, Washington.

This program engages middle school

PROMOTING INTERGENERATIONAL INVOLVEMENT

The photos here and on page 56 were taken by amateur photographers younger than 18 or over 50 and were originally entered in GU's annual photo contest. The ongoing initiative, funded by The Metlife Foundation, also offers cash prizes, and for this year's Grand Prize winner, an all-expenses-paid trip to Washington, D.C. for GU's 13th International Conference.

At the conference, GU will distribute a first-of-its-kind "How-To Guide" to developing intergenerational shared websites. This publication, which is offered free from www.gu.org, also explores the challenges that can accompany new or different ways of bringing the generations together. The Generations United Conference, themed *The Intergenerational Current: Across the Life Span and Around the Globe*, will be held September 13-17, 2005, in Washington, D.C. It will include a special track on grandparents raising grandchildren.

and high school students to share their knowledge and expertise in computer technology with older adults. The older adults then pair with elementary-age students as internet pen pals and exchange e-mail, surf the web, build friendships, and participate in service learning projects on a regular basis. The program has helped improve seniors' computer skills while building mutually beneficial relationships across the generations.

Programs such as Computer Pals® are publicized by GU in the largest online directory of intergenerational programs nationwide. This free, searchable directory, called i-PATH, is the centerpiece of the GU website, www.gu.org. Funded by Verizon Foundation, i-PATH stands for intergenerational Programs, Actions, Technologies, and How-to.

For persons representing nonprofit organizations, neighborhood senior centers, or community projects looking to raise the visibility of their intergenerational program, or for companies or individuals seeking to infuse intergenerational ideas in lives and communities, the i-Path can be the starting point on a lifelong intergenerational journey.

Generations United encourages action around a variety of public-policy issues that impact our families throughout the stages of our lives, from Social Security to subsidized guardianship for GrandFamilies to seniors for

universal pre-kindergarten.

Whether you're a widow receiving a Social Security survivor's benefit, a grandfather raising a grandson in foster care, or a retiree concerned about the quality of early childhood education, intergenerational public policy affects you, your family, and your community—now and into the future. GU is your resource for educating family, friends, and policymakers about the economic, social, and personal imperatives of intergenerational cooperation.

Intergenerational programs offer numerous benefits such as sharing and learning between generations, dispelling stereotypes about young and old, and exchanging culture and history. Perhaps 4-year old Zachery, participating in a shared child and adult day care, summed it up best when talking about an adult dementia patient he interacts with daily: "Mr. Jerry teaches me and loves me, and I loves and teaches him." ■

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More info

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