

Building Bridges



Photo by Donna Waller

Cory Nicholson, Santa Fe Trail Elementary School student, chats with Charles Martin, a resident of the Manor Care Center in Independence. Students from Santa Fe Trail Elementary School visit Manor Care residents as part of the "Building Bridges" program.

Students learn value of age

By DONNA WALLER

The Independence Manor Care Center is buzzing with fifth-graders from Santa Fe Trail Elementary School, in Independence, as they mingle, talk and laugh with the residents in the Care Center's dining room.

The Independence Manor Care Center and the Santa Fe Trail Elementary School are just two of the participants in the "Building Bridges" program created by Dr. Nina Chen from the University of Missouri's Outreach and Extension Center.

"Building Bridges" is a community-based program to bring young and old together to have meaningful experiences and interactions. Education, friendship and caring are main components of the program.

"I think it is very important for us to help the younger generation learn about aging issues, and learn to establish a sense of caring and respect for the elderly," Chen said.

Chen also explains that research

shows, if children don't have enough opportunity to interact with their grandparents or older people, they are likely to have negative feelings about the elderly. So, Chen works with schools and other youth organizations, senior citizen centers, nursing homes and other agencies to help raise public awareness of the value of inter-generational relationships.

For Older Adults the "Building Bridges" program provides higher self esteem, new friends and social contacts, restored confidence, shared skills and talents and a chance to exchange affection.

Youth gain a broader view of life and of aging, a sense of caring, sharing and respect for older adults, acceptance of differences, meaningful relationships with someone special and interaction with positive role models.

Sherry Eaton, School counselor at Santa Fe Trail Elementary School in Independence, Missouri, is thrilled with the results of the program.

"Just to see the excitement in the kids is so cool," she said. "I think this is going

to make an impact in their lives socially, too. I think the elderly population is so undervalued in our society. We need to start with the kids to show them the value of these wise people and get them so that when they're adults and in the work force, they will always respect and fight for rights for all people."

Brenda Peak, fifth-grade teacher at Santa Fe Trails Elementary said, "There's a lot of things that our kids can learn that these people have lived. And it's so much better to learn it from a live person than from a book. The kids have really grown out of this experience. I hope we can continue it."

Fifth-graders Jacob Wilbanks, Laura O Dell and Cory Nicholson hope the program continues as well. They were amazed at what they found out about their buddy's hobbies, favorite foods and family life. Wilbanks said he learned that "old people are nice."

To find out more about "Building Bridges" numerous inter-generational programs call Dr. Nina Chen at 816-252-5051 or e-mail at chen@missouri.edu.