For over a decade, the Pen Pal Project with the Building Bridges Program has fostered a unique friendship between Senior Companions and KC school children. With the promise of a letter a month, the grade school children write to and receive letters from a Senior Companion. Presently there are twelve Senior Companions in the program with at least one pen pal, and some SCs have two or three.

The Building Bridges Program (BB) through University of Missouri Extension was created in 1995, and consists of twelve different projects. The purpose of each project is to help bring young and old together for meaningful interactions and experience. SC Program is among over 70 community partnerships that participate. Some of the projects include Arts And Crafts, Dancing and Intergenerational Science – and of course, the Pen Pals.

“Students develop character, caring and respect for the elderly, empathy and sympathy for different cultures and history,” according to Nina Chen, Ph.D., CFLE, a Human Development Specialist with Building Bridges. “Too often the young have a negative perception of the elderly – gray hair, wrinkles, unable to do anything. Building Bridges increases the comfort of the young with the old, and the old with the young.”

Nina has been part of the intergenerational BB Program since its inception. With a Masters degree in Human Development and Family Studies, and a Ph.D. in Education, she brings a comprehensive approach to the program’s main components - education, friendship and caring. Nina also teaches a number of community based classes on intergenerational issues and aging. Among her favorites are Humor, Families and Aging & Tai Chai.

“Without the Senior Companions’ commitment for over a decade, it would have been very difficult for the Pen Pals Project to have been successful,” Nina stated. For Nina, her greatest thrill is seeing the Pen Pals finally meet, as they did at the 2014 Volunteer Recognition Event on June 10th. (See photo above)

If you are interested in becoming a Pen Pal, please contact Gwen. It is a fun win-win project for everyone.