How uniting kids, elders helps both

By Matt Perry (https://www.calhealthreport.org/author/mperry/) • Jul 18, 2016

(https://www.calhealthreport.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/IMG_2263.jpeg) It's a solution for two problems at once: children desperately need mentors to guide them, and isolated seniors yearn for more connection and meaning.

The growing intergenerational activities movement received a powerful jolt last year when the Los Angeles-based Eisner Foundation sharpened its focus to solely support intergenerational programming.

"We've very excited and optimistic since they became really the first major foundation to focus on intergenerational solutions," says Donna Butts, executive director for the national advocacy group Generations United (http://www.gu.org). Butts now predicts that "Los Angeles County can be one of the top counties in the country to value and engage people of all ages."

In a world seemingly more divided each day, intergenerational programs offer connective solutions that benefit everyone. Kids get the attention they crave – sparking better performance at school – while their elder counterparts enjoy improved emotional and physical health.

Why the Eisner Foundation's new emphasis on intergenerational programming?

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“The simplest reason is that it works,” says Trent Stamp, the foundation’s CEO. “We’ve seen the data kind of overwhelmingly assault us over time — working with primarily low-income seniors and primarily low-income kids.”

Eisner grant recipient Jumpstart for Young Children (http://www.jstart.org/where/southern-california) saturates 13 preschools with adult mentors over 55 in underserved LA neighborhoods — Compton, South LA, East LA and Echo Park. As many as six senior volunteers are placed in preschool classrooms ranging in size from 15 to 22 — an astonishingly low student-teacher ratio that promotes rapidly improving literacy rates.

“The research shows that by the time children enter kindergarten there’s already a large literacy gap between children from more affluent communities,” says Christine Manley, program director for Jumpstart LA. “Having more adults per child makes for a higher quality learning environment.”

One reason for this, says Stamp, is that older adults have unique abilities: they’re more patient, empathetic and dependable.

“You get longer, high-quality life for seniors, and children whose test scores go through the roof because senior mentors prove to be the best mentors of all.”

And the benefits to intergenerational programming extend far beyond heightened test scores and improved health. Stamps says at election time, older adults are more likely to support sales and property taxes that benefit children. And kids gain a deeper appreciation for the aging process.

Stamp says Los Angeles is the ideal incubator for future intergenerational programs because of its ever-expanding diversity and size.

“This is what the United States will look like,” says Stamp. “If you can build an intergenerational program in Los Angles with all the challenges, you can probably do it anywhere.”

The foundation’s support is another boon for the City of Angels, where aging experts have been encouraged by the efforts of Mayor Eric Garcetti, who was elected on a platform that included support for older adult services.

Intergenerational programs could also become a healing balm not just for today’s society, but tomorrow’s.

The foundation’s website includes shocking statistics about the demographic future of Los Angeles County: of today’s over-18 population, seniors comprise 20% while those of “working age” – 18 to 60 – total 80%. By 2040, the proportion of seniors will double to a whopping 40% as those of working age plummet to a scant 60%.

With California facing a rapidly approaching caregiver shortage (https://www.calhealthreport.org/2013/07/28/a-growing-crisis-that-spans-generations/), Stamp says intergenerational programs pave the way for more workers in age-related fields.

“Kids want to work in areas in which they’re familiar,” he says. “The single biggest determinant of what your child does is what you do.”

Butts lauds California as one of the country’s leaders in intergenerational programs.

There are successful intergenerational programs scattered around the state — including ONEgeneration (https://www.calhealthreport.org/2014/01/19/onegeneration-combats-ageism-right-from-the-start/) in Van Nuys, Dance Generators (https://www.calhealthreport.org/2012/11/04/uniting-generations-provides-direction-to-older-adults-and-youth/) in San Francisco and Kids Connection (https://www.calhealthreport.org/2011/10/26/connecting-generations/) at Eskaton Village senior living near Sacramento. A handful of intergenerational co-housing complexes also dot the state.

Yet nowhere has intergenerational programming been so successful as San Diego County (https://www.calhealthreport.org/2012/11/04/uniting-generations-provides-direction-to-older-adults-and-youth/), which launched its efforts a decade ago, in large part due to the pioneering efforts of its nationally renowned Aging and Independence Services – one of the state’s 59 Area Agencies on Aging. The county received Generations United (http://www.gu.org)’s Best Intergenerational Community Award in 2012 (https://s3.amazonaws.com/pushbullet-uploads/ujzNDwQrsR2-rPaz658dNILKPQOYg30GY1zQAkLpxijp/12-Best-Intergenerational-Communities-Awards-Web.pdf).

San Diego County’s Workforce Academy for Youth has been named one of just 25 Programs of Distinction (http://gu.org/OURWORK/Programs/ProgramsofDistinction.aspx) by Generations United (http://www.gu.org). San Diego County is also home to a second distinctive program recipient – Sunshine Care (https://www.calhealthreport.org/2014/07/07/dementia-the-greatest-generation-and-a-ray-of-sunshine/) assisted living in Poway.

“It took time and it took a lot of hard work and it took vision,” says Butts of San Diego’s efforts. “It’s become embedded in the way they think and work.”

The Eisner Foundation (http://eisnerfoundation.org) is underwritten by former Walt Disney Company CEO and chairman Michael Eisner, and today has an annual grant-giving budget of about $7 million. Historically, the foundation has supported low-income children and adults, but last July began targeting solely intergenerational programs. It funds programs as diverse as documentary films, marathon training programs, and the UCLA Division of Geriatrics.

The foundation largely funds local organizations so staff can more easily visit, support and monitor them.

Grantees like Junior Blind will provide program surveys to the foundation that summarize educational improvements for children and health changes for older adults.

Junior Blind adds Foster Grandparents – all of them African-American – into a South LA neighborhood school to reduce the adult-to-student ratio from 12:1 to just 5:1. The Foster Grandparents help blind children with homework, gardening, cooking and exercises like yoga and kickball.

Tim Carpenter (https://www.calhealthreport.org/2013/10/14/senior-arts-colonies-come-ready-to-play/), whose company EngAGE is an Eisner grantee, suggests that intergenerational programming should be even more prevalent.

“It’s a no brainer that this is a win-win for society,” he says. “Students get mentors and seniors get a sense of purpose and meaning. Why are we not doing these everywhere with everyone?”

“What better role to play than creating the next generation of leaders and thinkers?” asks Jumpstart’s Manley.

And in the land of elevator pitches, Stamp offers one for intergenerational programming.

“You can produce healthy outcomes for society as a whole.”

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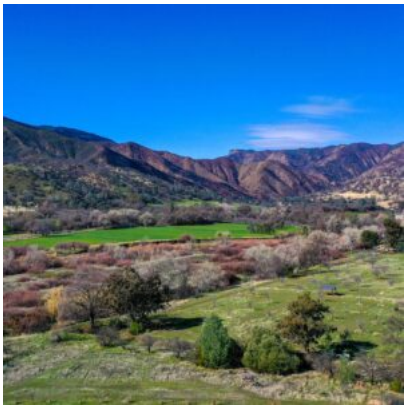

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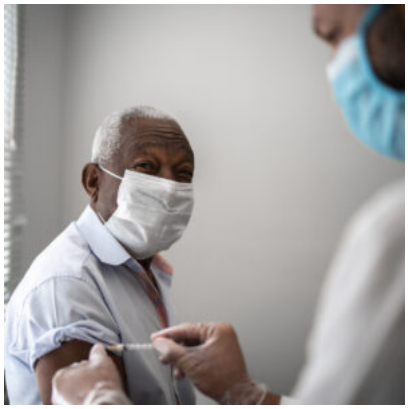

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