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Caring and healing span generations

Grade school children learn hobbies from volunteer seniors

By SANDY NAIMAN, TORONTO SUN

Lia Milousis is learning precious life-lessons -- and cross-stitching -- from a senior battling cancer.

Each week, the 10-year-old Selwyn Elementary School student sits at hexagonal table with five classmates as Linda McKay, in her late 50s, leads an informal and chatty sewing bee.

McKay is called a "grandperson," like all 100 volunteers in this intergenerational learning-teaching program run by Community Care East York, a seniors' agency.

Milousis said solemnly that McKay was diagnosed with cancer and lost her hair during her chemotherapy.

"She is really courageous to still come to school," the grade five student said. "I know if I had cancer, lost all my hair and had to wear a hat, I'd be afraid people would tease me, but she has more courage than I'll ever have."

Before yesterday's class, McKay suddenly whipped off her purple knitted cap to show the kids her bald head.

"I'm getting peach fuzz. Want to see it?"

It's the third week of a seven-week session, so by now everyone is used to McKay's "joking around," Milousis said.

Five kids at another table sew brightly coloured parrots in felt with the help of 77-year-old Emily French.

"It keeps you young to be constantly in contact with another generation whose outlook is so different than when I grew up," the 15-year veteran volunteer said.

Developed for caring seniors with hobbies and skills they love to share, the program is really a vehicle for intergenerational contact, co-ordinator Cory Willis said.

Since starting in 1985, it is now offered in 12 East York schools to 800 children.

Willis said children invariably feel "higher levels of self-esteem and self-worth, and their confidence levels rise when they can interact positively with seniors."