



## Volunteer Spotlight

- **Pals for Life**

*Posted by Julie Hennis on 4/29/2021 2:30:00 PM*

When the schools closed down back in March 2020 due to Covid-19, many of us felt we might be out for 2-3 weeks. More than a year later, though by no means back to business as usual, schools have reopened and the staff has returned to work. With people now getting vaccinated, there actually seems to be hope on the horizon that there may be an end to this pandemic in the very near future.

The pandemic has affected everyone, but perhaps no one more than children and senior adults. Both age groups found themselves in a position of not being able to get out and socialize which led to feelings of isolation and loneliness. Children felt lost not being able to see their grandparents. In many cases, children actually lost a grandparent and found comfort in sharing stories with their senior pals. The senior population also felt isolated in addition to being most vulnerable to the virus.

Raquel Harris, 7th grade language arts teacher at Culbreth Middle School, teamed up with Linda Kroger, another 7th grade teacher at the school, and the two, along with some volunteers at Carolina Meadows, started a pen pal project. The physician at the retirement community said that some of their residents were experiencing the same feelings some of the students felt: loneliness. On her website, Ms. Harris states: Though I don't talk about it often, I am a teacher, blessed with 105 middle school minds this year. They are snarky and sarcastic. They are witty and wonderful. They are tired and grumpy, excited and funny. But most of all ... they are lonely.

Students were matched with an adult based on similar interests. At that point, the pen pals began writing to one another, though the emails were always sent to the teacher first before being forwarded. Ms. Harris and Ms. Kroger agreed that reading these hundreds of letters has been rewarding during the

pandemic and that it has been a privilege to help cultivate these multigenerational friendships.

“This has been such an amazing experience” Ms. Kroger said. “The students ask things like ‘What it was like to have lived through certain events? How would they handle a particular friendship issue?’ Both teachers were the conduits to reading about these relationships and have been able to watch the relationships grow as the pen pal program continues. The experience has been rewarding for all involved.

Anita, a resident at Carolina Meadows, loved being part of the Pen Pal project and credits the teachers who made it happen. “When I first heard about it, I thought it sounded like fun. What a great idea for an assignment! Like everyone else, I had plenty of time on my hands to volunteer, but with the pandemic, that wasn’t possible. This project was a great way to volunteer some of my time, and I have been able to get to know a wonderful girl, who I now consider to be a friend.”



“The people at Carolina Meadows are very nice”, student Josh wrote, “and it's been fun getting to know about our pen pal’s feelings and life experiences. Not only is it something for us to look forward to during quarantine, but it also is something for the pen pal to look forward to. Overall it's a great experience and I will never regret being a part of it. My personal pen pal is very kind and his emails have shown how he personally has gotten through these tough times. In one email, he did a mitzvah (a good deed) by helping his neighbor, who has a hearing loss and recently lost his wife, and gave him some fertilizer to use for his garden. Just like his good deed, the pen pal project has given me hope and excitement for our world.”

Another student wrote,  
“I love being able to write to my Pen Pal because during quarantine we’re isolated from a lot of the world. Communicating with my pen pal has been really fun, and I’ve learned a lot about her life. Especially in this time of self distancing it’s been amazing to hear other people’s stories and learn more about their lives. It’s also been really great because I’ve been learning how to express my story through words. I’m so grateful to have this opportunity to learn about my pen pal’s happy memories, thoughts, and travels.” - Djina



One student even mentioned that he and his pal have been working on guitar moves together and recommended rock songs and guitar slide techniques to practice back and forth.

Understanding and caring about others’ perspectives is a vital piece to the learning process. Raquel Harris and Linda Kroger have taken this moment, during a global pandemic, to raise awareness of the power of relationships despite any age differences. Whether you are 86 or 12 years old, listening to stories and exchanging ideas is the way to make connections with people. It also might change your life forever.



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