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KIDS LEARN TO TELL SENIORS' STORIES IN NEW RIVER SCHOOL PROJECT

By MARY SCHLEY



During their first meeting, third-grader Aiden bonded a bit with his GrandPal, Susan.

CHLOE WARD'S newest friend is 77, grew up on a farm in Omaha, was a school teacher and likes to read, go for walks and learn new things. Max Dimitrov's buddy, Mary Sue, lives across the street from River School, was born in Illinois and was a teacher, has two cats, and likes to take photos, write books and watch football.

Ward and Dimitrov are third-graders at Carmel River School, and their new "GrandPals" are members of The Carmel Foundation. They and their classmates met their senior friends for the first time before Thanksgiving and spent time with them again Dec. 13 as part of a year-long project led by teacher Kim Hartnett.

"The idea first came to me in a moment of nostalgia, when I was missing my own grandparents, who had such a positive role in my childhood," Hartnett told the Carmel Unified School District board of education at a recent meeting. "I thought to my-



PHOTOS/COURTESY RIVER SCHOOL

Carmel Foundation member Sandy answered questions from third-graders Mila and Dahlia as part of the GrandPals project.

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GRANDPALS

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self, 'Carmel definitely has a lot of seniors, and we have the kids, so why not bring them together in a sort of buddy program?'"

She discovered a Canadian program called GrandPals, which "is designed to connect the youth of today to the rich history of their country through the eyes of those who have lived it," and developed a local version. Throughout the year, as the relationships between the kids and their older friends develop, the students will practice interactive reading and letter writing. In the spring, the students will capture their stories in writing and then share them at a year-end celebration.

"I started by reaching out to The Carmel Foundation, whose members enthusiastically joined forces with us," she said. For their first meeting Nov. 8, Hartnett and her kids walked the mile to the foundation to meet the 11 seniors who signed up to be their GrandPals, and read books, played and chatted. They made the trip again Dec. 13, this time to spread a little Christmas cheer, too.

"Through the sharing of stories, we hope to foster

friendships, cultivate collaboration, engage in meaningful interpersonal communication, and gain a broader historical understanding of our community and beyond," Hartnett explained.

And, she said, the time with the youngsters might help some of the city's older residents feel more connected and less socially isolated. "It was truly heartwarming to witness the face-to-face conversations, smiles and empathy," she said. "From the looks on the GrandPals' faces when my students gave them handmade Thanksgiving gifts, you would have thought they received the world."

Bridging the gap

Hartnett said she's confident her students will benefit from the attention and wisdom of their senior friends, who will, in turn, value their time together and enjoy having their stories told.

River School principal Jay Marden said the new program "not only bridges the generation gap, but is of immense benefit to our kids



PHOTO/COURTESY RIVER SCHOOL

River School third-graders and members of The Carmel Foundation are forming friendships and learning about each other through the year-long GrandPals program head-

as they learn, through a primary source, about the seniors' lives and the history they experienced during different eras."

Melissa McKenzie, director of programs and services for the foundation, said the arrangement allows members "to influence and educate the next generation," while the kids "not only develop reading skills, but also learn about collaboration and interpersonal communication."

CUSD board member Tess Arthur attended the Dec. 13 get-together and described the experience as "heartwarming."

"I just experienced one of the most precious things," she said.