

# CONNECTING COMMUNITIES ACROSS GENERATIONS

*Local students regularly visit residents at Melbourne's Emmy Monash to share traditional cultural activities*

**A**s with any good recipe, success depends on the ingredients. Maureen Shulsinger from Melbourne's Emmy Monash Aged Care has found that to be true, whether it is baking cheesecakes or creating an intergenerational community program.

"We were approached by Mount Scopus College wanting their students to volunteer for community work," Maureen said. "The school originally suggested the students could

perform songs for our residents but I was much more interested in developing meaningful connections through regular engagement between our residents and the students."

Maureen realised there was an opportunity for the students to experience aspects of their Jewish heritage with the residents of Emmy Monash.

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“Since the first Bridging the Gap program in 2012, the program has grown. We now have 19 Year 9 students from Mt Scopus School joining our residents almost monthly for yoga, cooking, sculpting, walks in parks and having conversations,” she explained. “One of our residents speaks only Hebrew, which is the home language of one of the students and he was able to translate for her. Another girl is studying French at school and comes to converse with our resident who is fluent in the language.”

At the heart of the approach is the idea of ‘doing with, not doing for’. Following the success of this initial Bridging the Gap program, Emmy Monash has also introduced a weekly Friday program with Bialik College in preparation for the Sabbath. Year 6 students visit, and serve the residents at lunch including traditional Challah bread that is made on site and then wishing everyone the traditional ‘Shabbat Shalom’ (Peaceful Sabbath). Together residents and students then arrange flowers for the tables of the evening Sabbath meal

“We also offer opportunities for students and residents to cook food together as part of celebrating festivals, such as making cheese blintzes, a type of crepe filled with sweet cheese. It’s a practical way to share culture and ensure traditions are passed on,” Maureen said.

Two of the residents also visit Mount Scopus Gandel Besen House, a nearby kindergarten, which has provided opportunities to demystify ageing for younger children. “They’ve embraced our residents, calling them Safta Leslie and Safta Sula, (meaning ‘grandmother’) and they can’t wait for hugs and cuddles. Safta Sula is a 96-year-old Holocaust survivor and she takes them for rides on her walking frame.

“Safta Leslie experienced many health issues when she first came to us, but since being around the children her health has markedly improved. During a recent heat wave she was adamant nothing was going to stop her being there for her regular Wednesday 9am class. Both Safta Leslie and Safta Sula come back to Emmy Monash full of stories to share with the other residents. At Passover this year, they even took part in the school’s holiday performance and dressed up as biblical characters.”

Their presence has meant children as young as five are part of conversations about ageing, helping overcome stigma. “Many of the students don’t have grandparents, or their grandparents live in other countries. Others have younger grandparents, so this is their first exposure to much older people,” Maureen said.

“We explain everyone is a person first, no matter what their age. We talk to the children about what to expect, about making eye contact and sitting close. They know to put their school bags away so they don’t block wheelchairs.”

Maureen has also been able to connect medical students to residents who had medical careers. “It means our residents are still giving, and are able to help students starting out on their chosen pathway.”

When asked what makes Emmy Monash’s intergenerational community so strong, Maureen explained it comes down to being contemporary, fun and active. “The ingredients we use are passion and love. We don’t go wrong with those.” ■

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