

Seniors + Kids = Magic

By Elyse Umlauf-Garneau

When you're vetting long-term living options, look beyond just the traditional measures of location, price, and amenities of a facility.

There's a new item to add to your wish-list.

Kids.

The presence of young children can transform the ambiance of senior living centers and improve residents' lives.

The evidence can be found in "Present Perfect," a documentary film (www.presentperfectfilm.com/) that explores the lives of residents at Providence Mount St. Vincent, a Seattle retirement home. The home is situated in a building that also houses a child care program, the Intergenerational Learning Center (<http://washington.providence.org/senior-care/mount-st-vincent/services/child-care>), and the arrangement brings seniors and kids together five days a week for schmoozing, dancing, doing artwork, and having lunch.

The filming has wrapped up and a Kickstarter campaign

(www.kickstarter.com/projects/1246023967/present-perfect-a-documentary-film-post-production/description) just raised over \$100,000 that will allow the Seattle filmmaker, Evan Briggs, to edit the movie.

Isolation to engagement

Briggs' film shows the magic when the two age groups mix it up. Kids romp among seniors in wheelchairs, and the two groups play, giggle, and work together.

Seniors become engaged, they laugh, and the kids treat them like they're perfectly normal and not compromised by age, illness, and infirmity.

One of the movie's points is that such scenes shouldn't be abnormal.

"I wanted to explore aging and what's not right -- and to present a hopeful solution -- and show that it's feasible to address," says Briggs.

And one thing that's not right is the removal of seniors, both physically and emotionally, from the rhythms of society.

Present. Perfect.

Briggs says she observed a distinct difference in seniors' behavior when kids were present and when they weren't.

For one, she saw that seniors could be sitting side by side in utter silence. But the minute kids arrived, the majority of them perked up and started engaging. "I wondered about what about the place stripped them of their will to interact," she recalls. "It seems that they derive joy just from interacting with the kids."

In one clip, a little boy repeats his name over and over to a resident who can't quite hear if his name is Max, Matt, Mack or Match. The little one never loses his patience, nor does he write the man off and slink away. How often does it happen that adults simply give up in such a situation and melt into the woodwork?

"Kids are totally willing to put themselves out there. They create a different dynamic," Briggs comments.

And the title of the film is no accident. "Everything happens in one temporal space. Both groups have the ability to exist in the present better than most adults can," Briggs says. "It's something we could all learn from, and it felt nourishing to me to be living in the moment."

Aging reimaged

For kids, the experience brings immediate benefits as well as ones that may be realized decades into the future.

The children get the attention of a grandparent figure, they see aging as a normal process, and they gain a greater capacity to understand and accept differences, whether a person has hearing challenges or uses an oxygen tank or a wheelchair.

Who knows what the ripple effect of that early, positive exposure to seniors will be. Deeper compassion? A greater willingness to integrate older people in their lives? A desire to change the way society treats and views seniors?

Future perfect?

The movie also provides an opportunity to reimagine how to care for seniors and in a way that can bring them greater joy, vitality, activity, and human connections.

And aging challenges aren't exclusive to North America. Briggs and Providence Mount St. Vincent have received calls and media attention about the program from around the globe – Italy, Spain, and New Zealand, for instance. "There are few people who *aren't* behind that idea," says Briggs, who believes that changing how we treat seniors is possible.

For instance, why can't the fancy nursing homes that are being built from

the ground up incorporate a child care component? With all the mixed-use buildings being introduced in cities and suburbs, why not integrate senior care and public spaces where people of different ages can come together naturally?

So "Present Perfect" isn't just a heartwarming story. It can serve as a

call for something more. Something better.

And who better to push for change in how society treats seniors and how they're housed and cared for than the huge population of aging baby boomers?

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