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## Generational learning — children interview residents of Norfolk assisted living facility

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Arleen Spenceley | For The Virginian-Pilot

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Norfolk Christian third-grader Don Shearon, 9, interviews Dr. James Murphy, a resident of Province Place of DePaul, as part of a school project.



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A couple mornings a month, Don Shearon rides a school bus to an assisted living facility called Province Place of DePaul.

Inside, he visits James Murphy, one of its residents.

Murphy, 89, is a retired psychiatrist. Don, 9, is a third-grader.

He's also Murphy's biographer.

And that's "an honor," said the Norfolk Christian School student, whose work is for a class project called "Writing the Lives of the Elderly."

The assignment is "a vehicle for learning academic content in a very different way," said Sandra Masterman, a third-grade teacher at Norfolk Christian.

The school's 31 third-graders are partnered with 18 residents of Province Place, she said. When they visit, the students arrive equipped for interviews, with questions and clipboards and voice recorders.

The residents await their arrival in assigned spaces throughout the facility, so the children can find them quickly, Masterman said.

"When they get off the bus, they go straight there and get going," she said.

But getting the hang of it took a little time.

"When we first started, I was very scared," Don said. "I thought it was going to be some kind of wild, crazy goose chase."

But he learned "that it's nice to know someone new."

Now, the students make conversation without hesitation, sharpening some of their classroom skills.

"What we're noticing is that children who may at one time have seemed like they didn't have much to share verbally are asking questions, responding, doing the back and forth unbelievably well," Masterman said.

The residents have noticed other ways the project is helpful for the students.

"Things I've lived through they've only read about," Murphy said. "I'm a living resource."

So are the rest of the residents, said Ann Gibson, 85.

Students "learn that life goes on, and life is full of good and bad, and we survived it," she said.

Residents also get to reap the project's benefits.

"The children have learned, but I think we have, too," said Mary Bowling, 90.

Plus, the project is fun.

"All of the energy of the younger people is invigorating," Murphy said.

Their questions "bring back memories and for the most part, good memories," Gibson said. The students are "so fresh and new and excited, you can't help but enjoy it."

The project will end in May, when the students present each of the residents with a bound, illustrated copy of his or her biography.

It's "something (the residents) can have for themselves but also leave for their family members," said Jean Neice, activity coordinator at Province Place.

In the meantime, the project is a "bonding experience," said Neice — and a chance for the students to get "undivided attention."

They're paired with "someone who is not tied to any device, who only wants them," Neice said.

And "that's all the resident wants: to see this beautiful, young face and spend some time with him or her — no iPad, no laptop."

Don is grateful for the opportunity.

"You've taught us a lot, Dr. Murphy," he said on a recent visit. "We thank you."

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