



TELLING *our* STORY

The Far-Reaching Impact of Intergenerational Experiences

Last year, I lost the love of my life,” shares Jerry Schweibel. “My wife, Sandra, and I had 61 incredible years together and she was my best friend. As a loving mother and wife, she did everything to provide for our home and family, and while I was busy at work, she was always making plans to ensure that our lives and social life were full. But last year she was diagnosed with cancer and I became her round-the-clock personal caregiver. It’s what we do for the ones we love, and taking care of her was all that mattered. But in the process, I forgot to take care of myself, and after she passed, I didn’t know what to do or who I was without her. I was completely lost.”

Jerry’s sentiments are not uncommon. As we progress through different stages of life, we often struggle to find new purpose, joy, or focus as one chapter ends and another begins. The key to finding new balance is having a comfortable and safe place to be able to explore new beginnings, to test new roles, and try out new interests. This is the beauty of the JCC.

“I moped around and my days were empty and I didn’t know how to even begin to get moving again” Jerry shares.

“My daughter, who was worried, finally pushed me to join the Senior Activity Center at the JCC, where she hoped I’d make some friends and maybe take up a few new hobbies that would distract me from my grief. It was a smart suggestion that provided exactly what she was hoping for.

“What neither of us knew at the time was that the JCC runs a Grandfriend program that pairs seniors like me with a JCC nursery school classroom for the entire school year, where we get to play and celebrate holidays and really connect. And it’s this experience that woke me out of my slump.

“It gave me a renewed sense of purpose and I truly believe that becoming a Grandfriend saved my life.”

Jerry is one of many Grandfriends at JCC who says that their lives have been forever changed by the close bonds they have built with the JCC children. Studies show that seniors can gain improved self-worth when given opportunities to connect with children. In fact, these interactions not only invigorate them, they can actually improve cognitive functioning and even increase life span. And the children benefit as well. But most senior facilities are isolated from the outside world and can't provide such opportunities.

Fortunately, the JCC is a busy, thriving center that offers programs for people of all ages and all walks of life, allowing our senior population to be part of a bigger, embracing community where they can continue to enjoy valuable aspects of life that they couldn't take part in if they were in an insulated setting for seniors alone. This has made the JCC the perfect setting to bring generations together and how the JCC Grandfriend program was born.

"Within months of starting the program, our staff observed positive impact on the seniors, teachers and children alike," says Senior Center Director Judi Nahary, who spearheaded the program. "Initially, we only considered the benefits for the seniors, but it has proven to be equally beneficial for the children, and we are continuing to see more benefits as time goes on. Today, many children have grandparents who live far away and they don't get to see them very often. So both the grandparents and the kids miss out on the wonders and special kind of love that this unique relationship provides. Our Grandfriend program bridges this gap and fills a huge void.

“In fact, parents of children in our program often share that their interactions at school have helped them to feel more comfortable and connected to their own grandparents when they see them.”

Jerry was a bit nervous when he joined Ms. Jackie's class midway through the year, worried he wouldn't know what to say or do with the children, but she assured him that her students would welcome him and he could just follow their lead. And she was right! Jerry eagerly joined in all the activities, marveled at how much things had





Thanks to these kids and the JCC Grandfriend program, Jerry is once again engaged in life. He may have his off days, when he may not feel like going out and being social, but if it turns out to be the days he's going to visit his class, he is always inspired to get up and get going. He loves the kids so much, he now comes two or three days a week to spend time with them, and this special relationship has led to deeper involvement at the JCC as well. Jerry feels at home here, where he is loved by the children, parents and teachers alike, and he has begun to explore other ways to get involved with life at the J. He recently volunteered at the JCC annual *Golf Classic*, and attends JCC U programs featuring films and lectures.

“The highlight of my week is always the day I get to visit my class to read stories, play games and just have fun,” says Jerry. “And it really cracks me up sometimes. I’m a 85-year-old man who trained horses and managed a racetrack, so who would have thought that someone like me would be counting the days until I could spend time with 16 little kids? But I do!”

Sometimes, when I'm in the halls or the parking lot at the J, a parent will walk up and introduce themselves and then proceed to tell me how much their child loves me. They'll explain how they recognized me from some classroom photo and then go on to say that their child comes home after my visits and shares all kinds of stories about what they did with Grandpa Jerry. It never occurred to me that the children would bring all these stories home. But they do. And that really touches me.

“I feel like I have a million friends at the JCC and some of my favorites are under five years of age!”

The JCC is proud to be a place where seniors can come and feel like they are a vital part of their community – a place where they can explore their interests, be amongst friends, and experience ongoing opportunities for a full, vibrant next stage of life. The JCC Senior department offers a wide range of daily programming; engaging social activities; concerts, trips and lectures; holiday celebrations; free exercise classes and wellness programs, free kosher lunches, transportation services, a 6-day-a-week day program for people with Alzheimer's and dementia, caregiver support groups and more. For more info visit the JCC website at jccotp.org or contact Senior Center Director Judi Nahary at 201.408.1450.

changed from his own school days, and admired the new classroom atmosphere where children's thoughts and ideas become part of the class lessons.

“Jerry is always encouraging us to keep up the great work and he has brought such positive energy to our classroom,” says Ms. Jackie.

“He cheers the kids on and has built such a warm relationship with all of us. Everyone in class, including us teachers, all love him and look forward to his visits because he is such a big part of our classroom family. The bonds they have formed are so incredibly precious and as a teacher, it is so special to witness these two generations, nearly a lifetime apart, helping each other grow in mind and heart.”

Today, the children in Ms. Jackie's class call him Grandpa Jerry, chant his name when they see him in the hall, and drop whatever they are doing and run to him the moment he comes through the door. Grandpa Jerry is a man full of surprises and the kids can't wait to see what's up his sleeve. He likes to travel and he is always bringing trinkets from his trips to share with the class. He's brought them snow globes from Iceland and Alaska. And one day, he showed up with a bubble machine and had the kids giggling and leaping around the room, trying to pop the bubbles. This led to every class wanting a visit from Grandpa Jerry and now everyone, including the other seniors, get treated to ongoing demonstrations of his magic bubble machine. Some have even begun to call him Grandpa Bubbles.