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FEATURED

## Pen Pal Project enriches Branford seniors, Walsh 8th graders

By Lisa Reisman May 22, 2018



Sam Smith, 14, a student from Walsh Middle School in Branford, and Dorothy Ricker of Branford, 93, right, have a heart talk at the Canoebrook Senior Center.

Peter Hvizdak / Hearst Connecticut Media

BRANFORD — How many people do you know who print out their email and text messages and save them in a box under their beds?

That was a question posed, in so many words, by Branford's Lee Heckendorf at a lively meeting May 15 between a group of seniors and middle school students as part of this year's Senior Pen Pal Project sponsored by the Agency for Aging of South Central Connecticut.

The air of excitement along the table lined with 16 pairs of Walsh Intermediate School eighth-graders and Canoe Brook Center seniors was palpable. It was the first time the sets of pen pals had met after exchanging handwritten letters since September.

According to Agency on Aging's program manager Cheryl Larson-Strucaly, the purpose of the project is as much to revive the lost art of letter writing as to foster interest and camaraderie across generations.

"Some of our seniors might have imagined young people as being interested only in texting and video games," she said. "And our students might have thought they'd have little in common with our seniors."

The hope, she said, was that "the act of writing letters would be a bridge where they could meet in the middle and see each other as human beings and even enrich each other's lives."

By all accounts, those hopes were realized on a sunny Tuesday afternoon.

"The first letter took a long time to perfect," student Ava Brunner told pen pal Elaine D'Amelio. "We didn't learn cursive in school."

D'Amelio told Brunner that hearing about her classes and her dance lessons "brought me back to what I did as a kid," adding that she had to walk to and from school and also home for lunch.

"I remember we'd listen to a soap opera on the radio," Patty Torre, who was sitting beside D'Amelio, chimed in.

"That'd be so cool," said Torre's young pen pal Finta Bella.

"All the time I put into my letter was worth it because then I got to look forward to getting one from Patty in the mail, and opening it, and reading it," Bella said.

For eighth-grader Lenora Longway, who kept her pen pal, Anne Arnstein, apprised of her field hockey exploits and her interest in math and science, “you get to learn about what’s going on in this person’s life and you get to keep it. It doesn’t just disappear into cyberspace.”

Arnstein, in turn, celebrated Longway for her “impressiveness and high intelligence” by bringing a homemade tin of fudge decorated with chemical and geometric symbols. “It’s so nice to hear what kids are doing in this day and age,” she said.

“Getting a letter in the mail is like getting a present,” said Walsh student Zaide Schlesinger, who shared an interest in skiing with her pen pal Peter Craig.

“A handmade present,” Madelyn Kavanaugh added. “It’s why people save handwritten cards or notes. It’s a keepsake.”

Not only that. As the New York Times’ Maria Konnikova reports, studies show that writing with pen and paper helps children read more quickly, boosts memory, and sharpens the ability to focus. For adults, “typing may be a fast, efficient alternative to longhand, but that very efficiency may diminish the ability to process new information,” she writes.

For Heckendorf, the benefits are simpler than that. “It means someone took the time out of their busy schedule to sit down and slow down and organize their ideas and craft a thoughtful message just for you,” she said, as the group, led by Nancy Cohen, danced the cha-cha.

“When I think about our future, I feel apprehensive,” Heckendorf added. “When I’m in a program like this, I feel comfort knowing these bright and engaged young people.”