

Elementary Day Camp at a Retirement Community

Senior adults and elementary children enjoy laughing, learning, listening, and loving, yet in our culture today they do not have as many opportunities as in the past to do this together. Grandparents often live in different cities, children don't run up and down the street visiting with senior neighbors sitting on porches, and generations are separated for many activities in the church.

Over ten years ago, Godwin Dixon, former CEO of Presbyterian Communities and Services in Dallas, Texas, and I were sharing our love of camp with children, our dreams of ways to have the generations interact, and the reality that church camp is a primary place for Christian Education and "mountaintop" faith experience.

Godwin thinks of retirement centers as perfect places for camp since the infrastructure - facilities, food, and healthcare - are built in, as well as, having the older adults who can share with children. From this conversation, "Grace Day Camp" was born the summer of 2009.



For five full days each summer, about 20 of First Presbyterian Church's rising 4th - 6th grade children participate in the community at Grace Presbyterian Village. Several years back the program added an additional week at Presbyterian Village North with children from Northpark and Preston Hollow Presbyterian Churches in Dallas, TX. The relationships born during these weeks of camp are nurtured during the year through additional short visits or seeing residents who are members of our congregations at worship and lead to such excitement as children, senior residents, and staff look forward to the next summer.

What are some of the highlights of our day camp?

- Eating lunch with residents in the dining room.
- Arranging flowers with residents for the center.
- Participating in "Gifts Hours," where residents teach small groups of children a skill or hobby, including making fudge, knitting, storytelling, card playing, or a tea party. Some of these sharing times take place in resident cottages.
- Singing and doing crafts with residents on the Alzheimer's unit.

- Leading bingo and donating prizes of tissues, lotion, and hard candy
- Hands-on learning about the different vocations at the center (e.g., nursing, social work, PT, OT, laundry, food service, HR, maintenance, wellness, etc.)
- Learning about the facility, it's history, and staff through a scavenger hunt.
- Swimming in the Wellness Center pool.
- Having a Walker/Wheelchair/Scooter wash.
- Leading morning devotions with song and skit for residents.
- Opportunities to hear about the vocations of residents.
- Participating in exercise class with residents.
- Decorating walker aprons together.
- Packing summer survival kits for the homeless.
- Visiting residents in small groups to hear their stories.
- Journaling and reflection time.
- Sharing a slideshow and program with residents and parents on Friday afternoon.
- Seeing smiles on the faces of residents as children "run" up and down the hallways all week greeting them and sharing their joy.



How do you go about planning such a camp?

- Identify a retirement community in your area and meet with the Program Director and Chaplain to plant the seed and develop a relationship.
- Take a group of children for a short visit to introduce the children and retirement center to the idea.
- Involve members of the church who live at the center or who make visits to the center. Ask them to identify folks to visit, gifts people might have to share, or who might be willing to help be adult sponsors with the children.
- Recruit youth assistants as well.
- Establish logistics and program, including cost, transportation, meals and snacks, schedule, educational opportunities, recreational times, and all activities. (Include tips on visiting seniors in different stages.)
- Design a t-shirt which children, staff, and residents who participate can enjoy.
- Work with the staff to help identify seniors who have a gift they can share and arrange for supplies to be provided.
- Plan a variety of activities, snacks, high energy and low energy activities, with seniors, for seniors, just for kids.
- Over plan and then go with the flow, adapting on the fly.
- Be creative and think outside the box.
- Watch for God at work in small moments and prepare to be changed.

How could this concept be adapted?

- Plan a one-day event instead of five days, or half days (ours is 8:00 am – 5:00 pm, which helps working parents from a downtown church).
- Join together with several churches in your community. (No more than 20 children is best, but you could do it with just a handful.)
- Bring the senior adults and children to the church for the event.
- Hold the camp at an adult day care center instead of residence center.
- Arrange with a church in a neighboring town to host your group overnight if you don't have a retirement center or nursing home nearby.
- Have children bring their lunch.

What are the joys?

- Seeing God's love and grace through simple acts of touch or a smile.
- Relationships which are built between senior adults and children and can become ongoing.
- Partnerships between churches and retirement communities or nursing centers.
- Hugs and smiles exchanged afterwards on Sunday mornings when children see church members who happen to live at the center.
- Children becoming unplugged from electronics and becoming comfortable with seniors.



One elementary student described her Day Camp experience this way:

*“Grace Presbyterian Village
Fun, Cool,
Awesome, Nice, Pretty,
Good, Fabulous
Retirement home”*

If you have any questions about the program or would you like to see a sample schedule, please feel free to contact miatta.wilson@pcusa.org.

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