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Kids, seniors alike learning with Connected Aging Communities

By Jason Marvin

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At the pinnacle of any quest for knowledge or skill stands a student who has become the teacher. In Park Falls and Phillips, it's a proverb personified as area students aid senior citizens in adopting the internet through the Connected Aging Communities curriculum.

Thanks to grant funding through Milwaukee-based Bader Philanthropies, the Connected Aging Communities initiative launched in December with "Learn-to-Connect" events at the Chequamegon and Phillips High Schools. Now, of course, our seniors are getting familiar with the technology, but the community development is becoming apparent, and talks have already begun to expand the program in Price County.

From teacher to student and back again

Between his roles as a teacher, principal, and Chequamegon school board member, Richard Ross has been involved with education in one capacity or another since 1961. Today, he is a student once again, as he has attended two Connected Aging Communities classes thus far, and he praised the work of the students in guiding the less tech-savvy older folks through the basics of iPads, smartphones, and social media.

But there was a twist.

The students-turned-teachers, it seemed, were looking to learn, too. Sure, these kids were the tech experts, but they admitted there was plenty they didn't know, like how to play pinochle and cribbage, or how to knit, or how to polka.

"And I thought what an opportunity to do something on an organized basis if we could get into this intergenerational thinking, so I think there's room to talk about how to develop something like that down the road," Ross said.

While nothing has taken shape just yet, the dialog has begun, Ross said, and Connected Aging Communities may very well have opened the door to a meaningful symbiosis between young and old that transcends the realm of technology.

“We’re gaining a lot,” Ross said, speaking on behalf of the seniors, “but I hope we can give back to the kids somehow.”

Creating a community for the future

As it turns out, senior citizens were on the Phillips students’ radar well before Connected Aging Communities even came about. As school district administrator Rick Morgan recalled, it was sometime last spring when the Student Council began brainstorming about how they might connect with their elders.

“In particular we were looking to support the group of seniors who are kind of in that transitional living stage in life. They’re still at home, they’re living independent, but because of their age and abilities, they’re probably in need of more support,” Morgan said.

They began to envision a structure through which they could facilitate trips to the grocery store, rides to appointments, and shovelers for snowy walkways. Then, in a moment of serendipity, project coordinators approached Morgan at the beginning of the school year and pitched the idea of a student partnership with Connected Aging Communities.

“We were already in the discussion and planning stages of trying to connect with this segment of our community,” Morgan said. “This is just a perfect opportunity for us to partner with someone else to be able to really springboard our initiative and get it going.”

As Morgan sees it, a large part of serving one’s community is understanding the people that reside in it. While most of us have some sort of personal connection to the aging community, he said, there are certainly older folks who don’t have family or friends around to help them. As with any segment of society, understanding the issues they face better equips the helpers for action.

Plus, the young only stay young for so long.

“If health doesn’t fail us, you know, we’re going to be in our 70s and 80s and hopefully able to live at our own residence, and who’s going to help us?” Morgan said. “So if we can create that structure now, it’s not only a good thing for our teenage students to become more cognizant of and participatory in, but hopefully then we become that next group that’s going to fall into that age group, and a system will already be in place to help us.”

Soon, the southern end of the county will be getting in on it, too. Prentice High School Principal Melissa Pilgrim said she attended a Connected Aging Communities session at Chequamegon last week to experience it for herself, and already plans are in the works for some Prentice sessions to be led by student council members. Pilgrim said the event will likely take place in March, though she is still working with organizers to solidify the details.

Upcoming sessions

The next sessions, “Exploring Personal Interest and Hobbies Through the Internet,” are scheduled to take place at Chequamegon High School on April 9 and at Phillips High School on April 11.

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