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## Pen-pal campaign unites generations

BY ANGELICA VECCHIATO, YOUTH SPEAK NEWS

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A Vancouver group connecting seniors and youth is throwing it back to the past by reviving a bygone practice: pen-palling.

Volunteer Grandparents has started a correspondence program, Letters to Seniors, to serve seniors facing isolation and loneliness during the pandemic by connecting them with youth.

"When COVID made many of our traditional in-person activities impossible, such as connecting seniors in the elementary schools, we knew that we needed to do something to help the elderly connect, so we started the pen-pal program," said Volunteer Grandparents' Veronica Grossi, a 45-year-old Catholic who started the program.

Volunteer Grandparents is an organization founded in 1973 that offers programs to foster intergenerational bonds between youth and the elderly.

The pen-pal program was unveiled in phases. It first started out by collecting kind messages, cards and drawings and delivering these to seniors' homes. However, the program quickly moved into pen-palling correspondences.

"The program was a big success," said Grossi. "In a short amount of time, we attracted over 270 registrants from the community, some people even wanting to participate from other countries. Over the last few months over 1,500 kind messages have been distributed to isolated seniors and 22 pen-pal matches have been created."

Radhika Patel, a second-year business student at the University of British Columbia, during her summer internship with Volunteer Grandparents helped develop and create guidelines for the pen-pal program. Patel said it has instilled hope among both youth and the elderly during the pandemic.

"We've got so many positive reviews," she said. "It just brightens someone's day to get a drawing or a kind message. You have the feeling of being supported and of being loved by your own community."

The benefit from these connections have been two-way.

"The youth and the elderly really begin to connect. One of our participants, a university student, was accepted into several universities and got advice from her elder pen-pal: follow your heart," said Grossi.

Francesca Ferronato, a Grade 12 student at Vancouver's Notre Dame Regional Secondary School, signed up to broaden personal experience during her high school years.

"I am giving my pen-pal a personal connection," said the 17-year-old. "She lives in a nursing home and doesn't get to talk with many people, other than those who live with her, so I am providing her with a new experience and a new connection. With the pandemic going on, I haven't been able to do much, but through pen-palling I feel like I am actively contributing to my community."

Lorna Berrouard, a senior in the program, corresponds with two young girls: a 17-year-old and a seven-year-old. She said she re-discovered the human connection that was lacking in a technologically-oriented world.

"It's the human connection that really matters," said Berrouard. "I look forward to receiving a letter in the mail from my pen-pal. It's nice to know that there are two people in the world who are thinking about me and enjoy talking to me. It is especially interesting to foster a connection with a younger person."

This intimate exchange reveals an interesting truth for Patel.

"Oftentimes, youth and the elderly are divided because of their age. Yet, we have a lot more in common with seniors than we think," said Patel. "Getting to know their stories and experiences, made possible through pen-palling, we can relate to them in our own place in life, knowing that they were once in our shoes."

*(Vecchiato, 16, is a Grade 11 student at Loretto Abbey Catholic Secondary School in Toronto.)*

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