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The Power of FRIENDSHIP

BY KATE UPTERGROVE



Grace Lisk and Patty Wirth

Plant a seed
of friendship;
reap a bouquet
of happiness.

— Lois L. Kaufman



OASIS members enjoying a fishing trip, above.

Want to learn more?

Singer Institute Senior Connections:

314-727-9202,

www.seniorconnections-stl.org

The Singer Institute is a St. Louis-based non-profit 501(c)3 organization that provides caring companionship for long term care residents in the St. Louis region who receive few or no visitors from outside the facility where they live.

OASIS:

314-862-2933,

www.oasisnet.org/stlouis

OASIS is a national, educational organization offering programs of continued lifelong learning, healthy lifestyles and civic engagement for adults age 50-plus.

Opportunities exist for both program participation and volunteering.

When Patty Wirth began volunteering with Senior Connections, a Singer Institute program, in 2006, she had no idea she was on the verge of making a wonderful, lifelong friend — but that’s exactly what happened when Patty met Grace.

“We really hit it off and became buddies,” Patty said.

“Well, Patty is a very easy person to talk to,” Grace countered, a hint of her native New York accent slipping through. “When we get together (at Mary Ryder Home where Grace resides), we just talk and talk.”

Sometimes they share their visit with Big Al, Patty’s much adored cat.

“When I bring Big Al we have a great time,” Patty said. “He always has a long line of visitors waiting to pet him.” And, Patty, Grace and Al are happy to oblige.

“I like doing things for people,” Grace explained — whether it’s sharing Patty and Big Al with her Mary Ryder friends; sharing the delicious chocolate birthday cake Patty’s husband made for her; or crocheting beautiful things for family and friends.

“Grace made this for me,” Patty said as she pulled a lovely, red ripple afghan out of a bag. “Look at how perfect her stitches are.”

Taking pride in each other’s accomplishments is a cornerstone of any good friendship, which may be why the OASIS FRIENDS program works so well.

Founded in 1993, the program offers an opportunity for OASIS members of all abilities to participate side-by-side in OASIS programs and FRIENDS events. But more importantly it’s a chance for friendships to flourish.

“Our similarities are so much greater than our differences,” said community outreach manager, Sharon Hales, M.Ed.

FRIENDS volunteer Suzanne Jeffrey couldn’t agree more. “Everyone has something to offer, something to bring to the table. At FRIENDS events, I try to model good social behavior and help the participants with disabilities,” she said. “But most of the time, we just have fun.”

Suzanne’s friends may be learning social skills from her, but she said she is learning valuable lessons in friendship from them.

“I get a lot of satisfaction from participating with the FRIENDS program. I enjoy talking with my fellow participants and hearing their stories. I like seeing the way they look out for one another and I love how truly happy they are to see each other and to see me. It helps me to appreciate what I have and what I am able to do. Being a part of FRIENDS just makes me very happy,” Suzanne said.

Loretta Davis understands well the concept of finding happiness through volunteering. Calling herself a “professional volunteer,” she describes her experiences as: “enlightening, heart-

warming, uplifting, emotional, important and fun!”

“I think volunteering is something everyone should try,” Loretta said when we met in her office at Travel The World (www.travel-theworld.net). As the owner of a travel agency, Loretta’s job is enjoyable, but as she pointed out, “Your job is not your life.” So, she volunteers with OASIS, the Singer Institute, AARP and others.

Like Patty, Loretta committed to Senior Connections was for one visit per week for one year. But unlike Patty, Loretta and her senior didn’t develop an immediate connection.

“It was a little harder for us to get comfortable with each other. I admit, at first, I thought, ‘What am I doing this for?’ But I told myself it was just one hour once a week; I could do that. After a few months, we bonded, and I was glad I hadn’t given up on us,” Loretta said.

Friendships, after all, don’t always happen overnight, sometimes you have to give them a little time to grow. It also helps to have some volunteer training, which both Singer Institute and OASIS provide.

In addition to peer-to-peer programs and activities for seniors ages 50-plus, OASIS also offers programs for seniors who are interested in helping younger generations.

Catch A Healthy Habit, a brand new OASIS program, offers seniors the opportunity to influence the health and physical fitness of children in grades K-5. Evelyn Gillespie, an OASIS Active Living volunteer, is looking forward to being among the first Catch a Healthy Habit volunteers in St. Louis. A former physical education teacher, she understands the importance of influencing children at an early age and helping them to make good choices that will stay with them throughout their lives.

“Kids are destined to learn. I try to give them the benefit of my knowledge in the same way someone gave knowledge to me,” Evelyn said. Plus, she sees a personal benefit in volunteering for Catch a Healthy Habit. “If you don’t use it, you lose it. So, I’m going to use it — in a beneficial way — helping a child, a teen, an adult. That’s what we have been put on this earth to do — to help one another.”