

Magic abounds when daycare, seniors home share roof ^[1]

Author: Monsebraaten, Laurie

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EXCERPTS

In the second-floor lounge at Toronto's Kipling Acres long-term care home, about 15 seniors in wheelchairs and walkers gather to the throbbing techno beat of "Gangnam Style" by Korean pop rapper PSY.

"Here we go," chirps early childhood educator Bama Thillainathan, as she leads a group of preschoolers into the room to "move and groove" with their elderly neighbours.

Mary Offen, 82, lights up as the children arrive. Her wheelchair rocks while both feet tap to the music.

"I love to dance," she says, grabbing the outstretched hands of 3-year-old Heaven Tulloch-Rankine. "I love them very, very much."

The children from the daycare centre downstairs revel in the adoration. And while some of them are timid at first, they are soon waving colourful pom-poms, shaking tambourines and cuddling up to the seniors. Everyone is grooving to the music.

"Integrating rehabilitation with the children is just another element we use to get seniors moving," says rehab specialist Adnan Baljic, one of several staff leading the program offered every Tuesday and Thursday morning. "They really respond to the kids. It's very uplifting."

As the population ages, a growing body of research points to the health benefits of meaningful social engagement and intergenerational activities for the elderly.

Recent media reports about a Seattle nursing home that shares space with a preschool may seem like a surprising new way to bridge the generation gap. But for Toronto child-care officials, who have been operating similar programs in local long-term care homes for more than 25 years, it's old hat. And they say their young charges have just as much to gain as the seniors.

"It is a wonderful way for the children to develop empathy and an understanding of the needs of others," says Nancy Roscoe, who oversees the daycare at Kipling Acres as program manager of early learning and child care for the city's west end.

The long-term care home on Kipling Ave. north of Rexdale Blvd., is one of three municipally run senior's facilities that also house city-operated early learning and child-care centres. All were built in the early 1990s when provincial funding promoted the construction of workplace daycares.

But with the 2011 redevelopment of Kipling Acres — and increased awareness of the benefits of intergenerational connections — city staff wanted the daycare to play a larger role in the home, says Roscoe.

When the daycare was originally built, it was in a separate wing with its own entrance. When Phase 1 of the redevelopment opened in 2014, the new 36-space daycare, serving children from birth to age 4, was incorporated into the main building with access through the home's spacious, light-filled front lobby.

The centre's playground opens onto a courtyard that serves residents, an adult day program and a new seniors community centre, opening later this year. Lounges with large windows on every floor of the 192-bed home also overlook the courtyard so seniors can watch the children play.

The "move and groove" sessions along with bimonthly cooking, crafts, bingo and other activities are part of the home's regular programming to help build connections between the children and the seniors, says Roscoe. This is in addition to Halloween costume parades, visits from Santa at Christmas and celebrations for other special days.

Opportunities for spontaneous interaction, such as strolling through the halls when the weather is bad, or dropping in on the adult day program where one elderly participant loves to lead singsongs with the kids, are also encouraged.

"It may not seem like a big deal, but it really is important that these little people are walking through (the home) with their parents and they're a part of this whole community," Roscoe says.

"Whether it's in the morning or at night when they are leaving, they are seeing people who are in wheelchairs, using walkers, who have white hair," she says. "Children learn through experience. And here they get to experience another generation they might not see at home."

Despite the preponderance of runny noses and coughs common in daycares, outbreaks among the seniors are rare, Roscoe notes. The liberal use of hand sanitizers before and after "play dates" as well as disinfectant protocols in both the daycare and residential areas limit the spread of germs between the two groups, she adds.

There are currently no official government policies or funding mechanisms to actively promote the construction of child-care centres in seniors' facilities. But Roscoe says staff are always looking for possibilities to co-locate a daycare with a long-term care home as part of the city's larger commitment to intergenerational programming under Toronto's Seniors Strategy.

Linda Koslowski, whose 82-year-old mother Stella has Alzheimer's and has been a resident at Kipling Acres for just over a year, says having a child-care centre in the home has been a "wonderful bonus."

"My mother loves kids. When I take her out to the mall, we have to stop at every baby," says Koslowski, who lives in Vermont and visits every two months. "It's just fantastic to have the children here."

Parents of children at the centre are equally enthusiastic about the setup.

"It was a nice surprise when I saw this," says Andres Quiroga whose daughter Yolanda, 3, and 20-month-old son, Isaac, attend the centre.

"It's nice for them to see someone like their grandfather," says Quiroga. His 75-year-old father lives in Colombia and the children haven't yet met him.

"Yolanda is more kindly to older people since she comes here," he says. "She is more interested."

Ebenezer Komolafe, who also has two children at the centre, says the daycare's location in a seniors' home is closer to life in his native Nigeria, where the elderly live with their families.

"For me it is a positive," he says. "Seniors have this calming effect, which I like for my kids."

Dr. Samir Sinha, director of geriatrics at Mount Sinai and the University Health Network Hospitals is a huge fan of the concept.

Although Sinha is not aware of any specific studies on the impact of interactions between young children and the frail elderly, volumes of research show that seniors who are socially engaged have better health. They are less likely to feel lonely or depressed and tend to have lower blood pressure and delayed cognitive decline, he notes.

"There is growing interest and support for what we call intergenerational activities — the concept of bringing the generations together to promote intergenerational connectivity," says Sinha, appointed in 2012 to lead the province's Seniors Strategy. "It can also help to fight ageism."

While the arrangement offers wonderful opportunities for both children and seniors, it also benefits the staff, says Kipling Acres administrator Nelson Ribeiro.

"It brings better outcomes in terms of the care," he said. "When you're having a difficult time or something is wrong and you see those little kids out there playing and smiling, it just makes your day."

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