Fifth-graders learn what itâ??s like be older â?? by interviewing seniors

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Fifth-graders and seniors at the Friends School storytelling event.

Once a week, a group of fifth graders visits some of the seniors who live at Valencia Gardens, down the street from their school, for games and conversation.

â??People think that seniors are cranky, grumpy and mean. Theyâ??re not,â?• said student Jaxon Howard. â??It was special to hear them talk about their lives.â?•

Thatâ??s just the kind of lesson the San Francisco Friends School hopes to impart. Learning in and from the community is an essential component of the curriculum at the Quaker school. Eighth-graders study homelessness and volunteer at St. Boniface Catholic Church. Fifth-graders explore aging: what it feels like to be older â?? problems with seeing, hearing, pains, and loss of mobility.

â??The idea is to develop empathy and connection. Quaker education is all about relationships and developing connection,â?• said Guybe Slangen, director of community engagement.

So it was that in mid-April, a group of seniors from Valencia Gardens and other community groups sat down to be interviewed by students. In May, each student shared an elderâ??s story in â??performancesâ?• in the school auditorium. The senior subjects were given front row seats, while parents, friends and some first-graders fanned out behind.

â??Iâ??m surprised that the seniors opened up to tell their stories to people they didnâ??t know instead of keeping them inside,â?• said fifth-grader Eliza Kingsland. â??Hearing feedback from the seniors who came to our performance was very special.â?•

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A story is a gift

The students dramatized lives filled with pets and friends, siblings and families crowded into one room; school and work, scary adventures and funny events. They told of being Jewish and hiding out during World War II, running from bombs in Europe and Japan, and having to leave your home country; of fires and explosions, not having enough food, and the deaths of friends and family.

â??I wanted them to learn to balance the fun and happy moments with the sad moments, and to see how others handled problems,â?• said Jon Burnett, who has taught drama at the school for the past 16 years. â??By fifth grade, theyâ??re still very enthusiastic, very spirited, but theyâ??re also starting to make some advanced choices. Theyâ??re going deeper and bigger in their thinking.â?•

The students had practiced their interviewing and note-taking skills and developed follow-up questions. In the weeks preceding the production. Burnett helped them flush out the stories. Together, they chose sound effects, costumes and props. â??Stories make good drama, you remember good stories,â?• he said.

â??Itâ??s all about sharing stories with the people you interviewed,â?• added Slangen. â??When someone gives you a story itâ??s a gift. It shows respect and gratitude when they give it to you and when you give it back.â?•

â??I thoroughly enjoyed those kids,â?• said Robin Larsen, a St. Francis Square resident who attended. â??They were smart, polite, curious, good senses of humor, and already a few want to be journalists, which warms my heart.â?•

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Date Created
01/07/2018
Author

jgoddess

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