

Menlo Park: Young volunteers spend summer break partnering with older adults at Rosener House

Friday, July 17, 2015 | By KEVIN KELLY. Daily News Staff Writer

A local organization is helping bridge the divide between young people and older adults.

And for at least one high school-aged volunteer, it's helped her establish a more meaningful link with her own grandparents.

"Coming here taught me something about elders and how ... to have a better connection with them," Kimberly Giang, 14 -- who is volunteering a whopping 32 hours a week over the summer -- said Tuesday at Rosener House in Menlo Park.

"There's a different way to talk with them. Sometimes you have to engage the conversation and I'd never really tried that with my grandparents."

Rosener House, a branch of Menlo Park-based Peninsula Volunteers Inc., offers adult day services for a generally older population suffering from chronic conditions. Rosener, which works primarily with clients experiencing dementia, employs physical, speech and music therapists.

Peninsula Volunteers CEO Karae Lisle, who said the organization has a pool of roughly 2,000 volunteers, 20 percent of whom are youths, is particularly fond of Rosener's music program, in which each client receives an iPod shuffle into which the family or caregiver helps program familiar songs.

"Music is unlocking," said Lisle, adding that "We have a music and memory program, which is one of the more innovative."

One volunteer working toward a career in music therapy said that before coming to Rosener she was set on working with children, partly because she had no experience with seniors. Her grandparents died before she got to know them. "I didn't think I would know what to do or how to act when I was around them, because I didn't have that experience," said Rebekah Steiner, 19, a Redwood City resident on summer break from University of the Pacific in Stockton. "They really help you out here and show you what to do, and the participants are all really friendly. Not all of them are as talkative as others ... but they will engage you in conversation."

The irony is that Steiner's interest in music therapy was sparked after reading an article about stroke patients who were regaining their speech through the use of singing and music therapy. "That was the first time I'd ever heard of music therapy and I just thought that was the coolest thing, because I love music and I love helping people, and it just felt right," she said.



Volunteer Kimberly Giang, 14, works with Rosener House clients in the art room at... (Kevin Kelly)

San Jose Mercury News

Added Lisle, who started working with seniors when she was in the Girl Scouts, "I think the benefit ... is that seniors get to see what the next generation is coming up with (and) being with young people makes them feel younger. ... I think the benefit for youths is that they get to understand more about the world."

Pooja Goel, 16, of Palo Alto, who has volunteered at Rosener since the eighth grade and was recently featured on the Peninsula Volunteers website, might have expressed best the rewards of intergenerational connections: "I can honestly say that becoming friends with (older adults) has been one of the most eye opening experiences in my life. I have heard war veterans talk about their pain in WW2, and I have heard someone tell me about their journeys as a former journalist. Although many of the participants have dementia, they are always willing to have a good time. Seeing them get so excited for the littlest things in life has allowed me to look at the brighter side of things."

Aside from Rosener, Peninsula Volunteers operates Little House, a community center for older adults, a Meals on Wheels program and Peninsula Volunteer Properties, 123 affordable housing units in Menlo Park for seniors.

Where the organization currently has the most need for volunteers is Meals on Wheels drivers, as the coverage area is expanding north from the Highway 92 area toward Millbrae. Karae said Facebook recently donated \$2,500 to the Meals on Wheels program, but it still has a funding gap, given that it issues about 300 meals a day and the federal government only covers about 43 percent of the cost.

From 1 to 2:30 p.m. on Wednesdays, Rosener holds a free caregiver support group to allow families considering adult day care to "come and meet other family members caring for their loved ones facing challenges and limitations ... to share experiences and feelings, exchange information and discuss different coping styles." For more information, call Florence or Kathi at 650-322-0126.

Erika Buck, senior engagement strategist at Rosener House, said she is hoping to start a different type of group at the facility -- teens sharing their experiences volunteering with older people with others their age.

"I'm really wanting to create a teen-type volunteer tourism program to really help the two generations, that intergenerational connection," Buck said.

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