

# A match for the ages | Preschoolers and retirees

"Was the universe trying to tell me something?" That's the question former preschool teacher Anne Gressle asked herself when she moved to the Oak Park Arms, a retirement community in suburban Oak Park.

Her move happened to coincide with the opening of a new preschool in the building called Kindness Creators. The school administrators held a meeting with the seniors who lived there to explain the school's philosophy and to encourage them to help out in the classroom.

After 40 years of teaching preschool, Gressle was ready to retire but she attended the meeting anyway. "I thought I was done, and then this came along," she says. So, with the universe whispering in her ear, Gressle decided to volunteer and now spends three days a week with the preschoolers, reading to them and taking them to the park. "I didn't think I would ever be interested in anything like this again. But there you have it," she says.

## Mixing it up

Preschoolers and retirees make a good match. The kids like having grandparent-like figures around. The older people love the lively interactions with the youngsters.

That's why many retirement communities offer intergenerational programs. The goal is to mix two age groups to the benefit of both.

Putting a preschool inside a retirement community is a real plus. Proximity creates easy opportunities for the groups to interact.

At the Oak Park Arms, the two groups get together for mini-golf Monday in the lobby and arts-and-crafts Tuesday in the ballroom. There's a weekly game day and special events such as the spring Easter egg hunt. The birthday club meets once a month to celebrate the seniors and preschoolers who share the same birth month.

"The kids call the residents their friends," says Jaime Moran, co-founder of the school. "They are part of the kids' lives." A preschooler's mom even asked for the phone number of her child's friend to set up a playdate, not realizing the friend was a senior who lived in the building.

Moran started the school with Pam Lawrence. They are experienced early childhood educators and long-time friends. They got the idea to put a preschool in a retirement community after seeing a documentary about how it's being done in Europe. So, why not here?

They contacted Moses Williams, the executive director at the Oak Park Arms, who welcomed the idea. A five-year plan was created, and Kindness Creators opened just 18 months later in August 2019.

As the school's name suggests, Kindness



Photo by James C. Svehla

Anne Gressle, Oak Park Arms resident, right, with Kindness Creators Preschool student Aria Williams and teacher Justin Styles, left, taken last June.

Creators is focused on empathy and how to manage big emotions. The co-founders also both have close relatives who have suffered from memory loss and dementia. Moran's mother who has dementia works at the school.

The kids learn to be tolerant from their interactions with the seniors who may use walkers or wheelchairs or have some type of disability. "Our program is based on accepting everyone where they are at," says Moran.

## It's like a family

The Oak Park Arms has 124 residents. The community offers independent and assisted living apartments. Short-term stays are also available. An adult day program, held Monday through Friday, is open for residents as well as those who live in the wider area.

The community is known for its

abundance of activities, many of which are open to the public. Planning was recently under way for the spring dance. A senior prom for older people is being held in June. An outdoor concert series kicks off this summer.

All residents and those in the adult day program are welcome to join in the preschool's activities. "It's therapy for the residents," says Danielle Seals, outreach coordinator and adult day coordinator at the Oak Park Arms. "The kids like it too."

The pandemic set intergenerational activities back a bit when the seniors and kids couldn't interact as much, unless they were outside. Zoom sessions and friendly waves from the hall helped to fill in the gaps. But things are getting back to normal now.

Ice cream socials are popular. "Get a little sugar in these kids and they start dancing," says Renee Steingard, director of leasing and resident engagement at the Oak Park

Arms. "Even residents get up and dance."

Another favorite: the monthly visit from Howie, the Oak Park Police Department's comfort dog. "The residents and kids love to pet him," says Steingard. Howie even has his own Instagram page.

Young and old alike have a lot to offer each other. Oak Park Arms resident Gressle loves reading to the kids. Sometimes she reads to one child. Other times a group spontaneously gathers on the rug. They love the Pigeon Book Series by Mo Willems. Their favorite, "The Pigeon Wants a Puppy."

Gressle says helping with the preschoolers gets her out of her own head. "When you get to be a certain age, you have concerns about how the world is going," she says. "Being with the kids is a good way to forget about what is going on and just to be with them," adding, "It's like a family."