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Students, senior citizens share letters, friendship in Grand Pals program

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By Joyce Rainey Long

GREEN — Sixth-graders at Green Intermediate School and local senior citizens have been corresponding via letters through Grand Pals. In its seventh year, the Grand Pals program is sponsored through RSVP of Summit County, a retired and senior volunteer program.

The 32 students in the program are assigned to a senior citizen and introduce themselves in a first letter, according to Pam Fetchu, Green Intermediate special education teacher. The students continue to write one letter each month, include holiday cards, and receive one letter each month in return.

"Students are learning the art of good letter writing," said Inese Alvarez, director of RSVP. "The 'grand pals' love children and serve as positive role models through letter writing to encourage, inspire and pass on their wisdom."

The program began in the Akron Public Schools District, and Fetchu brought the program to Green two years ago after her mother, Carolyn Vogenitz, of Coventry, a member of RSVP, suggested it.

At the end of the school year, on May 24, the students and the seniors in the program met for the first time at a picnic at the school. The students presented their grand pals with small flowers in pots they decorated, and some of the seniors gave small gifts to their students.

Also, RSVP gave each student a handmade tote bag filled with a calculator, dictionary and pen, and each senior was presented with a certificate and a McDonald's gift card.

Although the students were not graded on their letters, their correspondence was proofread and sometimes needed to be rewritten, said Green Intermediate sixth-grade language arts teacher Sarah Sears.

"Students learned how to get their thoughts organized and how to answer questions in complete sentences," said Fetchu.

After all the letters were written by the sixth-graders, Fetchu delivered them to Vogenitz, who mailed each letter to a senior citizen with the postage paid by RSVP, according to Alvarez. The seniors then mailed their letters to Vogenitz, who delivered the letters to school.

"I couldn't wait to get my next letter," said Misty Drake, a sixth-grader who wrote to Mary Miller, of Akron.

Students would read and discuss their letters in class, Fetchu said.

"Some of the grand pals served as surrogate grandparents to the students," added Sears.

"We are just as excited as the students are to get their letters," said Akron resident Kathy Boles, a retired teacher who corresponded with sixth-grader Alexis Walent. "We share our lives."

"I wrote about the ponies next door to Nimisila School," said Ethel Stokes, who is a retired Manchester Local School District teacher and New Franklin resident. "We would share our ice cream bars with the ponies, and the ponies would know which classes were nice and who would feed them."

She corresponded with Emily Bader, who wrote about herself and her family.

Other grand pals discovered they have common interests with their assigned students.

Sixth-grader Brooke West found that she and her grand pal, Margaret Oldes, of Copley, both enjoy sewing. Brooke decorated all of her letters with drawings of clothing she hopes to design one day.

"I'm fascinated with the talents she has and how interesting her life is," said Oldes.

Miller, the former manager of the Green Branch Library, said she and Misty discovered their mutual love of books and animals.

"This program bridges the gap between generations. Seniors learn what good things are happening in the schools and community," said Fetchu.

For more information on the Grand Pals program, visit www.matureservices.org or call Alvarez at 330-253-4597, ext. 166.

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Ethel Stokes, of New Franklin, gives sixth-grader Emily Bader a handmade quilt at the Grand Pals picnic May 24.



Sixth-grader Marrison Blough gives Carolyn Vogenitz, of Coventry, a flower. Vogenitz also corresponded with sixth-grader Austin Sklack, who is shown next to her, during the school year.

Photos: Joyce Rainey Long

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