

Planting memories: Students help seniors remember better times

By Ellyn Ong Vea

Cicero Life

Thu May 31, 2007, 05:54 PM CDT

Cicero, IL -

Mariella Rodriguez loves that Estelle Rozek recognizes her face.

And though Rozek doesn't recall Mariella's name, she can remember how they potted a flower the last time they were together.

Building new memories is one goal of the Memory Bridge Initiative, which 11 students from Unity East Junior High school completed Monday after a semester of monthly meetings with residents suffering from Alzheimer's and other memory-loss disorders at Alden Town Manor Rehabilitation and Health Care Center in Cicero.

Peggy Mahoney, Alden's director of dementia services, said students in the program build one-on-one, "best buddy" relationships through visits and letters to the residents.

"Students get residents to reminisce, get them out of what they're currently dealing with and to look back on the past and share their life joys," she said.

Fond memories like robbing a stage coach as well as climbing a cherry tree and staying up there to read a book were among stories residents shared.

A student who wants to become a nurse one day listened to a senior recollect days of delivering babies as a nurse at MacNeal Hospital in Berwyn.

The "when I was your age" stories inevitably come up, such as the one a resident from the South told about picking cotton with her siblings and father.

Students participate in the program under a teacher who instructs them about how Alzheimer's affects people's brain and communication.

Kids also get tips on talking to someone in their own time zone.

Still, Mariella, 13, used phrases she said didn't seem familiar to Rozek, such as "going to the mall" and "going on field trips."

Nevertheless, Rozek, 92, doesn't seem to pay much attention to the 80-year age difference and said about Mariella, "She's not a girl, she's a lady."

So when Rozek had meetings with the junior high girl, she made sure her outfit and make-up were perfect for the "aversion" she said she enjoys with Mariella. Rozek gets to talk about things such as her one-time dog named Topsy.

At the last meeting of the program on Monday, Mariella gave Rozek a framed photograph of the two of them.

Rozek will likely display the frame on top of her dresser in her Alden room and position it next to the two frames of her pictured with students from other Cicero schools that previously participated in the program, now in its second year.

But Mariella doesn't want their friendship to become a long-term memory, especially since Rozek's short-term memory is better.

"I feel kind of sad. We were really starting to get to know each other," Mariella said. "Hopefully I will get to see her again over the summer. I would ask my mom or dad to bring me."