Seniors and 7th Graders Learn That ‘Moving Through the Ages’ Nets Unforeseen Benefits

**Issue:** Janet Folchetti, SHAPE America member and middle school physical education teacher at Norwalk (CT) Public Schools, was headed to work with her colleague Mac DeVito last year when they passed the Maplewood at Strawberry Hill senior living community. “I had a vision of older people trying to stay healthy,” says Folchetti. A teacher for 32 years, she began reflecting on how her efforts to inspire students to be “fit for life” often fell upon deaf ears. “They are universally in denial that they, too, will get old someday,” she says. “They might give it lip service, but it has no real meaning for them.”

In fact, young people aren’t the only ones who deny the ageless connection between fitness and health. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, an estimated 80 percent of adult Americans fail to get the recommended amount of exercise each week, potentially setting themselves up for future health issues. Research by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) shows that seniors who stay active have improved balance (and a resulting lower risk of falls), as well as reduced incidence of heart disease, diabetes and other serious health problems. Exercise sustains joint health, reduces the chance of depression, and increases strength, mobility and independence. However, an overwhelming majority of seniors are not sufficiently active to achieve these benefits.

The “Moving Through the Ages” program at Nathan Hale Middle School connects students with local senior citizens to share physical education activities led by seventh-graders.

**Implementation:** Once a week from October to May 2016, a group of senior citizens were transported to the Nathan Hale Middle School gym to share PE activities led by the seventh-graders. “I really wanted the students to take ownership of the program,” says Folchetti. Stations were set up in the gym to maximize space and accommodate a variety of physical needs. A typical session began with the students and seniors walking together around the perimeter of the gym, followed by activities such as chair aerobics, beach-ball volleyball, ring toss, parachute, and other games, tailored to individual mobility.

The group averaged from five to 12 seniors, ranging in age from 70 to 92, and included this intergenerational experience, they could become aware that staying and keeping fit is a lifelong journey.” Folchetti reached out to Maplewood at Strawberry Hill’s program director and the plan for “Moving Through the Ages” began to take shape.

**The Big Idea:** As Folchetti and DeVito talked, an idea began to form: Perhaps there was a way to connect their students with the local seniors around a mutually beneficial goal.

“I wanted my students to become involved in the community, and thought this could be an opportunity to work with a population that is sometimes forgotten,” she says. “Through SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators is the nation’s largest membership organization of health and physical education professionals. The organization sets the standard for health and physical education in the U.S., and its National Standards for K-12 Physical Education serve as the foundation for well-designed physical education programs across the country. SHAPE America was also a proud member of the coalition that developed the National Health Education Standards, and is a founding partner of the Presidential Youth Fitness Program, Let’s Move! Active Schools (now Active Schools) and the Jump Rope For Heart/Hoops For Heart programs.

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close to 40 students. “Soon, the seniors began asking when they could come back and began clearing their calendars for the weekly trips, scheduling their doctors’ appointments around the outings,” Folchetti says. “Some came with walkers, and one woman with an oxygen tank played catch with the students,” she says. “The oldest participant, a World War II veteran, brought in medals and pictures to share with the students.”

For the seventh graders, Moving Through the Ages provided a valuable perspective they might never have gained.

“I didn’t know how they would react or benefit, but I really saw them flourish and mature from the experience,” Folchetti says. “A few were a little apprehensive at first and watched from the sidelines, but they quickly warmed up to the seniors. By the second visit, the kids were eager to meet the seniors outside the school and walk them to the gym. They would set up chairs and equipment for the seniors, and make sure they drank enough water. Some students even brought in cookies to share with them.”

Takeaway: The program not only exceeded Folchetti’s hopes and expectations — it also taught the teacher a couple of valuable lessons: 1) never try to predict students’ reactions, and 2) don’t hesitate to take chances and introduce new ideas in the classroom.

Moving Through the Ages not only reinforces the students’ awareness of staying active and fit throughout their lives, it also helps them develop a sense of caring and respect for the elderly,” she notes. “It was so wonderful to witness their enthusiasm, leadership, responsibility and sense of caring toward the seniors. It really opened my eyes to how kids can grow and learn.”

Results: Now in its second year at Norwalk Middle School with a fresh crop of seventh graders, Moving Through the Ages has made such an impact that several students have started volunteering at Maplewood at Strawberry Hill. “They are reading to seniors, walking their dogs, writing cards to family members, and even helping them learn how to use a computer,” says Folchetti. “What began as a simple idea to help students understand the importance of staying fit for life ended up giving life to both populations in so many ways.”

SHAPE America’s National Standards for Physical Education

The physically literate individual:

- Demonstrates competency in a variety of motor skills and movement patterns.
- Applies knowledge of concepts, principles, strategies and tactics related to movement and performance.
- Demonstrates the knowledge and skills to achieve and maintain a health-enhancing level of physical activity and fitness.
- Exhibits responsible personal and social behavior that respects self and others.
- Recognizes the value of physical activity for health, enjoyment, challenge, self-expression and/or social interaction.

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is SHAPE America’s commitment to put all children on the path to health and physical literacy through effective health and physical education programs. Across the country, HPE teachers and other supporters are making an impact by taking action in the following areas:

- Effective Instruction
- Healthy Behaviors & Physical Activity
- Advocacy

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