Children act out stories told by senior citizens, bringing memories to life

By Andy Graham 331-4215 | agraham@heraldt.com
December 16, 2009

The kids gathered in a semicircle around Joan Creech’s wheelchair Tuesday afternoon to hear their play reviewed.

Creech’s face was glowing, and so was her review. “You did a wonderful job!” she said, nodding at the smiling kids around her. “I’m really proud of all of you!”

That stamp of approval was particularly meaningful, too, because it was Creech’s own story the children from Crestmont Boys and Girls Club had just acted out for Creech and fellow residents at Bloomington’s Golden Age Assisted Living Center.

It was one of four short plays the elementary-age kids performed at the nursing home, all based upon real-life stories told by Golden Age residents to Indiana University students from Donna Eder’s “Knowledge in Community” sociology class. Eder’s class has connections with the Crestmont club, helping fuel an after-school storytelling club there, so it seemed natural to combine the Golden Age stories with the Crestmont activities.

“We’re trying to understand how knowledge is both learned and passed on in a community,” Eder said before Tuesday’s performances began. “We wanted to learn specifically about Indiana and Bloomington in the process, too. Most of the residents at Golden Age are from Bloomington and grew up here.”

Creech is a Bloomington High School graduate who worked the line at Bloomington’s RCA plant. She told her story to IU student Abby Schuck, who was joined by classmates Brittany Markham, Johnique White, Christina Stigger, Ashley Urben, Sara Gust and Nick Parks in collecting stories from Golden Age residents.

Creech told a tale about how she and female friends working at RCA would bring nice lunches to work they’d made for themselves, only to have male co-workers steal the food while the women were busy on the line.

“Well, one day, Joan decided she’d had enough,” Schuck related. “She made a two-layer cake of cornbread, stuffing some broken up candy corn into the batter, then put a layer of mustard in the middle. Then she covered it all with chocolate icing to make it look like a regular cake.

“Sure enough, the guys took it. Joan and the women snuck over to look at them just in time to see the guys spitting out chunks of cake! It worked, too. They stopped stealing the food.”

That story and three others were recast as fables as Eder’s students Angela Ridgeley, Sydney Leroy, Amy Rouzer and Joanna Salinas worked with the Crestmont kids to present the stories and served as narrators Tuesday. There was a story about “Owen the hunting dog,” who overcame an injured paw to run with the pack. Another tale was about the bond between sisters, when one ruined but then repaired the other’s beloved doll. Another told about a mischievous dog who got caught in a groundhog hole, but came home after seeming lost, albeit with a broken nose and missing teeth.

The Crestmont kids’ version of Creech’s story, recast to protect the innocent, featured industrious mice who were getting their food stolen at a cheese factory by lazy, sleep-all-day cats. The cats, of course, then got their mustard-laden comeuppance.
Christiana Hoskins, one of the mice in the play, talked with Creech afterward and said, “So instead of mice and cats, it was you and other real people, right?”

Indeed it was.

Doreen Ray, a 1951 BHS graduate who knew Creech at school, looked across the room at Creech and said, “Joan raised six children by herself and put them through college, so she had to be tough. She was the most wonderful mother.”

Christiana, a fourth-grader at Fairview Elementary, after meeting with Creech and others in the audience, said, “I feel bad for other people, sometimes, because they have to be in nursing homes. My mom works in another nursing home, with about 100 people in it, but I don’t usually get to talk with them much, because they’re sleeping or just away in their rooms or something. It was fun this time to get to say hello the people here.”

Fairview second-grader Tania Luna thought so, too. “It made me feel good about myself,” she said. “We practiced to get to this point. I think we made them happy.”

They did. “These kids are fantastic,” Ray said. “I thought it was perfect.”

Harriette Duncan, a temporary resident at the Golden Age Assisted Living Center, talks with Dawnye Smith after she and other children acted out a story about a doll. The youngsters created plays based on stories told by Golden Age residents. Jeremy Hogan | Herald-Times
Dawnye Smith, left, DonTrice Barbee and Christiana Hoskins act out a story at the Golden Age Assisted Living Center. Jeremy Hogan | Herald-Times

Golden Age Assisted Living Center resident Doris Eads passes a group of children telling a story. Jeremy Hogan | Herald-Times

Copyright: HeraldTimesOnline.com 2009