

# I NEED YOU, YOU NEED ME:

THE YOUNG, THE OLD, AND WHAT  
WE CAN ACHIEVE TOGETHER

BACKGROUND PAPER

MAY 2017



**generations  
united**

Because we're stronger together

THE  
EISNER  
FOUNDATION



## ABOUT GENERATIONS UNITED

The mission of Generations United is to improve the lives of children, youth, and older adults through intergenerational collaboration, public policies, and programs for the enduring benefit of all. For nearly three decades, Generations United has catalyzed cooperation and collaboration among generations, evoking the vibrancy, energy, and sheer productivity that result when people of all ages come together. We believe that we can only be successful in the face of our complex future if age diversity is regarded as a national asset and fully leveraged.

To learn more about Generations United, please visit [www.gu.org](http://www.gu.org).

## ABOUT THE EISNER FOUNDATION

The Eisner Foundation identifies, advocates for, and invests in high-quality and innovative programs that unite multiple generations for the betterment of our communities. The Eisner Foundation was started in 1996 by Michael D. Eisner, then Chairman and CEO of The Walt Disney Company, and his wife, Jane, to focus their family's philanthropic activities. The Eisner Foundation gives an estimated \$7 million per year to nonprofit organizations based in Los Angeles County. In 2015, The Eisner Foundation became the only U.S. funder investing exclusively in intergenerational solutions.

To learn more about The Eisner Foundation, please visit [www.eisnerfoundation.org](http://www.eisnerfoundation.org).

## ABOUT THE SURVEY AND REPORT

A Generations United/Eisner Foundation survey was conducted online by Harris Poll from February 15 to 17 among 2,171 U.S. adults ages 18 and older. This survey is not based on a probability sample; therefore, no estimate of theoretical sampling error can be calculated.

For complete survey methodology, including weighting variables, please contact Emily Patrick, project manager at Generations United, at [epatrick@gu.org](mailto:epatrick@gu.org).

For details on all other sources, please see endnotes.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Generations United gratefully acknowledges the following dedicated individuals whose work and support made this report possible:

**Olivia Gentile** for her fantastic work researching and authoring this report.

The following people generously shared their time and insight in interviews and correspondence with her: **Zane Bail**, Northland Foundation; **Jamillah Bakr**, Cuyamaca College Intergenerational Garden; **Nouf Bazaz**, International Cultural Center, World Organization for Resource Development and Education; **Kat Burton**, Ithaca College; **Yvonne Campbell**, San Pasqual Academy; **Drew Christensen**, AGE to age; **Thelma Collins**, mayor of Itta Bena, Miss.; **Jeanine Dahl**, Northland Foundation; **Lindsay Dolce**, Reading Corps; **Gladys Fant**, Itta Bena, Miss.; **Cathy Feldkamp**, St. Ann Center for Intergenerational Care; **Karen Frandsen**, St. Ann Center; **Hal Garman**, Gaithersburg Beloved Community Initiative; **Lynn Haglin**, Northland Foundation; **Nancy Henkin**, Generations United; **Emily Laino**, Ithaca College; **Kusum Lele**, DOROT; **Bob McCune**, Longview; **Tracy McGinnis**, Southminster; **Erin McGrath**, Senior Corps; **Mark Meridy**, DOROT; **Linda Merrill**, St. Ann Center; **Lizzie Morris**, Reading Corps; **Joanne Newsome**, Senior Corps; **Deborah Parkinson**, DOROT; **Pam Plimpton**, San Diego County; **Christine Pogorzala**, Ithaca College; **Ross Ramos**, San Diego County; **Zahra Riaz**, International Cultural Center; **Casey Rozanski**, St. Ann Center; **Nadine S. Schnettler**, ROCORI Senior Center; **Sharon Selz**, St. Ann Center; **Atalaya Sergi**, Jumpstart; **Pamela Smith**, San Diego County; **Audrey Stein**, DOROT; **Judith Turner**, DOROT; and **Moyra Woodward**, San Diego County.

Special thanks to Generations United staff **Emily Patrick**, **Donna Butts**, **Sheri Steinig**, **Jaia Lent**, and **Alan King** for envisioning, leading, and managing the survey, the report, and the release event for this significant contribution to the intergenerational field. Additional thanks to **Adam Hlava**, **Mary Harris**, and **Adam Otto** for their support on the release event.

Thank you to the following Advisory Group members for their valuable guidance, expertise, and feedback during this process: **Maria Cruz-Saco**, Connecticut College; **Rob Dugger**, ReadyNation; **Jatrice Martel Gaiter**, Volunteers of America; **Jasmine Hicks**, Young Invincibles; **Eric Kingson**, Syracuse University School of Social Work; **Joan Lombardi**, international expert on child development and social policy; **Chelsea Mason**, The Eisner Foundation; **Eunice Lin Nichols**, Encore.org; **John Rother**, National Coalition on Health Care; **Trent Stamp**, The Eisner Foundation; **Gene Steuerle**, The Urban Institute; and **Fernando Torres-Gil**, UCLA Center for Policy Research on Aging.

Finally, Generations United is grateful to **The Eisner Foundation**, whose support made this project possible and whose commitment to intergenerational solutions is inspirational.

### Design & Layout

Six Half Dozen Design Studio / Alexandria, Virginia

### Photos

On the cover: A preschooler and an elder celebrate Christmas together at the St. Ann Center for Intergenerational Care in Milwaukee. *Photo by Cathy Feldkamp.*

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## 1. WHY THE YOUNG AND THE OLD MUST UNITE

We live in an age-segregated society.

Kids spend their days at school, mostly among peers born the same year they were. Young and middle-aged adults cluster at work. And elders gather for clubs, classes, and meals that often expressly bar the young.<sup>1</sup> At night, some of us go home to our children or our parents, but millions of college students and elders live in age-restricted housing,<sup>2</sup> and about six in ten American neighborhoods skew young or old. Nearly 25 percent of the nation’s neighborhoods contain a disproportionately high share of elders, while another 31 percent contain either a disproportionately high share of children and their parents or a disproportionately high share of young adults.<sup>3</sup>

Strikingly, in a recent Generations United/Eisner Foundation survey of adults around the country, more than half of respondents—53 percent—said that aside from family members, few of the people they regularly spend time with are much older or much younger than they are.<sup>4</sup> Young adults between the ages of 18 and 34 appear to be the most isolated from other generations, with 61 percent reporting a limited number of much older or much younger acquaintances. And most young adults—64 percent—say they’re sometimes unsure how to talk to people who are significantly older or younger than they are.<sup>5</sup>

It wasn’t always this way.

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**“Age segregation is neither natural nor benign,” according to Peter Uhlenberg, a professor of sociology at the University of Chapel Hill.**

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In early America, the generations mixed pretty freely, even though high mortality rates in middle age kept the population of elders small. Kids didn’t necessarily go to school, and when they did, their classrooms weren’t stratified by age.<sup>6</sup> For better and for worse, children, youth, and adults of all ages worked on farms and in factories and other settings together. This was even true in the military, where boys as young as 11 fought alongside elders in their 60s.<sup>7</sup> Retirement was practically unheard of, largely because few could afford it.<sup>8</sup>

But in the late nineteenth century, Americans began to recognize both children and elders as vulnerable populations that deserved public protection, a shift that was soon reflected in new policies and institutions. Schooling became compulsory and age-graded, child labor was banned, and youth organizations such as the Boy Scouts, the Girl Scouts, and 4-H were created. When the Great Depression proved disastrous for elders, the Social Security program was launched.<sup>9</sup> All the same, high rates of elder poverty persisted, prompting a raft of laws to combat it in the 1960s. Thus Social Security payments were increased, Medicare was established, and senior centers and senior housing were created nationwide.<sup>10</sup> Retirement became a standard phase of life.<sup>11</sup>

Because of these changes, children and elders thrived as never before. But, inadvertently, the changes also consigned both groups to isolation—from mainstream society and from one another.

Fortunately, Americans still believe that kids and elders merit special treatment. A phenomenal 93 percent of adults think that children and youth are a vulnerable population that society has an obligation to protect, the new Generations United/Eisner Foundation survey shows, while 92 percent believe the same about elders. Nearly as many adults—88 percent—said the federal government should invest in the wellbeing of both age groups.<sup>12</sup>

But now, we realize that protection should not equal isolation.

Children and youth benefit from building relationships with elders in their communities, agree 93 percent of adults; elders benefit from these relationships as well, say 91 percent. An overwhelming majority of adults—77 percent—wish there were more opportunities in their community for people from different age groups to meet and get to know one another.<sup>13</sup>

Notably, most adults—78 percent—believe the federal government should invest in programs that bring together young and old Americans. Sixty-one percent of adults would like to see more parks, playgrounds, and recreation centers that cater to all ages; 60 percent want more youth to visit and help elders in their homes; and 60 percent want more elders to mentor and tutor children and youth.

Scholars, too, are calling for age barriers to be eased—for everyone’s sake.

“[A]ge segregation is neither natural nor benign,” according to Peter Uhlenberg, a professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.<sup>14</sup> For one thing, when the generations don’t mix, it’s easy for them to see one another as rivals. By contrast, when people of all ages get to know one another, they tend to unite around shared goals instead.<sup>15</sup>



**An elementary school student makes art with an elder in Moose Lake, Minnesota, where the “AGE to age” initiative has brought young and old together.**

*Photo by Scott Streb for the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota Foundation.*

What's more, scholars say, age segregation nurtures ageism—a form of discrimination that 76 percent of adults consider a serious problem in our society, according to the Generations United/Eisner Foundation survey.<sup>16 17</sup> Conversely, if the generations were integrated, we would all be less fearful of and more empathic toward people who are much older or younger than we are.<sup>18</sup>

Age integration would chip away at racial and ethnic divides, too, since a disproportionately large share of elders in this country are white, while a disproportionately large share of young people are minorities.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, if the young and the old came together, so would people with political differences, since, on the whole, young people are more liberal than their elders.<sup>20</sup>

Besides, scholars say, blending the generations saves taxpayers money: why should a community build a teen center on one end of town and a senior center on the other when it would be cheaper if they shared a roof? When kids and elders are served at a single facility rather than at two separate ones, costs per client tend to decline, research shows.<sup>21</sup>

Most significantly, age segregation is denying the young and the old crucial opportunities to serve one another and their communities, scholars say.<sup>22</sup>

While many elders face significant challenges, older Americans generally enjoy more financial security and better physical health than they used to.<sup>23</sup> With their careers winding down and their basic needs met, they're looking to contribute to the public good.<sup>24</sup> But too often, there's no clear path for them to follow, since old age is still structured as a time of retreat.<sup>25</sup>

Meanwhile, our children and youth are hurting. Twenty-one percent of U.S. kids live in poverty, even though the overall poverty rate is only 14 percent; another 22 percent of children are nearly poor.<sup>26</sup> Poor kids are far more likely than their peers to struggle both academically and emotionally, and their parents are often under enormous strain.<sup>27</sup> Many would benefit from effective tutoring and mentoring—which, in an age-integrated society, elders could be mobilized to provide.<sup>28</sup>

With greater age integration, young people could also be mobilized to help elders, particularly those who are isolated and lonely. A third of Americans over age 65 and half of those over 85 live alone.<sup>29</sup> In one survey, nearly half of respondents between the ages of 62 and 91 reported feeling lonely at least occasionally, while 19 percent reported frequent loneliness.<sup>30</sup> Recently, scientists have linked loneliness to depression, cognitive decline, high blood pressure, and premature death; it may be worse for us than obesity and just as bad as smoking.<sup>31</sup> If isolated elders enjoyed regular visits from energetic young people, their loneliness could be eased and their health boosted. At the same time, their visitors would derive the satisfaction that accompanies productive service to society—a satisfaction that, for too long, both the young and the old have been denied.<sup>32</sup>



## 2. INTERGENERATIONAL PROGRAMS ARE CHANGING LIVES AND COMMUNITIES

The public wants the young and the old to come together, and scholars have pinpointed why they must.

Dismantling age segregation won't be easy; social change never is.

But a scattering of pioneers in both the public and private sectors have already begun the work of reuniting the generations, and they're reaping extraordinary results. Through carefully designed "intergenerational programs" in towns and cities around the country, kids are getting the attention they need, elders are finding purpose and connection, and the two groups are working together to make their communities better places to live.<sup>33</sup>

Here are some exciting examples.

### **"I am just there to love them": Elders in service to youth**

Some of the most remarkable developments have occurred in San Diego County, where the local government has made age integration a core community value.<sup>34</sup>

It all started in 1999.

An old woman with no family or friends had died, and county employees were sent to clean out her house.

"This woman had been dead for several days in her home, which was a filthy, cluttered mess," said Pamela Smith, who was then the county's director of aging services. "Her last years had obviously not been pleasant ones, and at the time of her death the place was literally a rat's nest."

"Somehow, this woman had simply disappeared from the community."<sup>35</sup>

Then, as Smith and other workers sifted through her belongings, they made a startling discovery: the woman had once been a teacher.

"It is heartbreaking to think society didn't stay connected with her, to continue to value her talents," Smith said. "What a difference she could have made in a child's life, and her own, if we had found a way for her to know we still valued her, and needed her."<sup>36</sup>

Smith vowed to change the way the whole county thought about elders.

"We really wanted to say, 'Wait a minute, we need to step back and realize that never before in the history of the world have we had this many people live this long who are this well educated, who are this capable, who have this much to offer,'" Smith recalled. "And that we really needed to start looking at the resources that older adults bring to the table."<sup>37</sup>

Elders themselves needed to realize this, too, according to Smith.

“You do have a lot to offer,” she started telling them. “You’re not just put out to pasture.”<sup>38</sup>

A lot of kids in San Diego were growing up under trying circumstances and without enough adult support, Smith knew. Could elders be mobilized to help them?

In 2001, she hired an “intergenerational coordinator,” and together, they got to work.

A new boarding school for foster teens, San Pasqual Academy, had recently opened in Escondido. Nationwide, only about half of foster teens graduate from high school, and the academy, a partnership between the county and a nonprofit organization, aimed to help local kids beat the odds.

It also aimed to help the kids emotionally. Many of them had been bouncing from dwelling to dwelling for years, and school leaders hoped they’d finally feel they were home.

So Smith and her staff helped recruit a crew of elders, or “grandparents,” to live in ten empty homes on the campus, which had previously housed a parochial school. The grandparents were offered below-market rent in return for devoting themselves to the kids.

“It was like magic from day one,” said Smith. “It was a win for everybody because the kids now had these people who cared about them, that they didn’t want to let down,” she said. “And of course, the older adults felt needed and important, and they thrived.”<sup>39</sup>

One of the first grandparents to arrive was Jean Cornwell Wheat, a painter and sculptor who collaborates with students on art projects and takes them to museums, plays, and poetry slams off campus. “Most of the foster kids have never experienced anything like that,” said Wheat. “It just opens up the world a little bit more for them.”

But primarily, she said, “I am just there to love them.”<sup>40</sup>

The integration of elders into San Pasqual Academy was so successful that it attracted the attention of the media, elected officials, and public and private agencies around the county, many of which asked Smith and her coordinator to help them start intergenerational programs, too.

## How to unite young and old in big cities: Lessons from San Diego County

No American metropolitan area has done more to unite the generations than San Diego County, where the local government considers age integration a core community value.

The county employs five “intergenerational coordinators”: one in the department of aging services, one in the department of child welfare, and one in each of three geographical regions. The coordinators work together, with their colleagues throughout county government, and with leaders in the nonprofit and business sectors to create opportunities for the young and the old to serve one another and the broader community.

For example, the county library department recently asked the coordinators for help designing intergenerational programs at its branches, and the county parks department wants guidance on uniting the patrons of one of its teen centers with the elder patrons of a nearby community center. The coordinators are helping both departments create surveys to assess what sort of programs might succeed; later, they’ll help launch, advertise, and implement the programs.

The coordinators also oversee two “intergenerational councils,” one in the northern part of the county and one in the eastern, that give officials from the public and private sectors a chance to strategize together. The councils meet every other month.

In some cases, all it took was for the right people to start talking.

For example, at Helix Charter High School in La Mesa, many kids weren't applying themselves, and their grades were suffering as a result. Through a senior center a few blocks away, the school connected with Bill Stark, a widower with a passion for chess. Soon, Stark was spending two mornings a week at the school teaching the game he loved to dozens of kids—on the condition that they'd turned in their homework that day.<sup>41</sup>

"The kids who wanted to play were the unlikeliest kids, not the honors students," said Judy Kirk, a teacher. "It meant a lot to them to have this kind of attention from Bill."

"He wouldn't just teach them moves. He taught them etiquette, the manners of the game. He taught them to shake hands before and after the game. They were to push in their chairs before they left."<sup>42</sup>

The experience was equally valuable for Stark, who died in 2005.

"The last two years of Bill's life were filled with joy and reward," said Smith. "He wasn't sitting home watching TV and depressed that he was no longer needed."<sup>43</sup>

Since the early 2000s, San Diego County has created four more intergenerational coordinator positions and established dozens of thriving programs, most of which seek to build intimate, sustained relationships between kids and elders. Many programs also try to make both groups healthier.

In 2012, for instance, a preschool in El Cajon worked with the county to create a fruit and vegetable garden that's jointly tended by students and a team of elder volunteers, known as "Garden Grannies." Twice a week, the grannies show the kids how to dig, plant, weed, and harvest, and when the day's work is done, they feast.<sup>44</sup>

The garden keeps both generations active and teaches the youngsters about nutrition.

"Today's kids have little concept of whole foods and eating what's grown in the garden," said volunteer and veteran gardener Pat Loughlin. "Ask them where orange juice comes from and they'll tell you 'out of the refrigerator.'"<sup>45</sup>

"That little hour you get with those little faces and you see the light bulb go on—it is just amazing," she said.<sup>46</sup>

There are also programs that unite young and old for a single but memorable day.

Once a year at several sites around the county, elementary school students and elders gather for the "Intergenerational Games." Each child is matched with an elder buddy for a morning of sports and a nutritious lunch, and though the event only lasts a few hours, some kids leave forever changed.

"Once I thought people at your age could not do many things, but you showed me you can," one girl wrote to her buddy in a thank-you note. "YOU ARE AWESOME!"

Wrote another girl, "When I grow up I will be what you are, do what you do, and think what you think. Thank you for caring, loving, and watching me."<sup>47</sup>

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Pamela Smith used her influence as a top-ranking public official to unite the generations in San Diego. But you can make a big difference without having a big job, as Hal Garman, 81, is proving in Gaithersburg, Maryland.

On the Sunday before Martin Luther King Day in 2011, Garman, a retired pastor, heard a sermon that changed his life.

Child advocate Marian Wright Edelman was the guest preacher at Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington, D.C., which Garman and his wife had been attending since their recent move from upstate New York to Asbury Methodist Village.<sup>48</sup> Edelman, the president of the Children’s Defense Fund and one of the founders of Generations United, described the plight of the many black and Latino kids who were trapped in what she called a “cradle-to-prison pipeline.”<sup>49</sup>

After the sermon, Foundry’s pastor asked members of the congregation to volunteer for a task force to address the pipeline in Washington. Garman, who is white, wanted to sign up, but he feared he was too old to commute to the city for evening meetings. So, at his wife’s suggestion, he decided to look into starting a task force right in their retirement community that would seek to serve kids of color nearby.

The next day, at Asbury’s celebration of King, Garman secured the cooperation of the community’s pastor and a crew of enthusiastic residents, many of whom had devoted their careers to advancing social justice and wanted to keep doing so in retirement.

The group began talking with local schools, government agencies, nonprofits, and churches about how they could steer kids away from crime. They also met with three young men who’d just been released from prison to find out what they thought might have helped them.

With help from Asbury staff members and officials around the region, the retirees crafted a variety of programs that now engage more than 80 kids and young adults annually. For example, residents serve as mentors to elementary school students, discuss the news with high schoolers, and help young Latino mothers learn English. An art teacher runs a photography course for tweens in Asbury’s nature preserve; residents assist her and host an end-of-term show.<sup>50</sup>

## How do kids benefit from intergenerational programs?

Young people consistently benefit in the following ways from well-run intergenerational programs, according to research:

- **Their social skills improve.** Kids learn to talk and empathize with people they wouldn’t otherwise meet.
- **They receive emotional support.** Elders shepherd kids through difficult times and situations.
- **Their self-esteem increases.** As they help elders, kids gain confidence in themselves.
- **Their school attendance, behavior, and performance improve.** For example, struggling readers have made significant gains after being paired with elder tutors.
- **They learn to make safe and healthy choices.** Elders divert kids from trouble and steer them toward success.
- **They learn about the past.** As they listen to the stories of elders, kids gain perspective on the present.
- **Their perceptions of elders change.** Kids learn to look beyond stereotypes of elders and see them as real people.
- **They make friends and have fun.** New relationships and experiences enrich their lives.

“To look at the world through the eyes of these kids ... you say, ‘Oh my gosh, what creativity, what imagination!’” Garman said. “I mean, every photographer will tell you, ‘Don’t shoot into the sun.’ They’ll shoot straight into the sun; they get the most interesting silhouettes.”<sup>51</sup>

Recently, the group, which calls itself the Gaithersburg Beloved Community Initiative, has also been collaborating with a nonprofit that helps immigrant and Muslim kids cope with discrimination. About one in five Muslim kids in the area has been harassed or bullied for being Muslim, according to the International Cultural Center, and about one in ten reports receiving unfair treatment from a teacher or school administrator.<sup>52</sup>

“Students feel very alone, and they feel targeted,” said Nouf Bazaz, a senior fellow at the World Organization for Resource Development and Education, which runs the International Cultural Center.<sup>53</sup>

In partnership with Bazaz, Garman recruited a panel of elders from Asbury to share their own experiences of discrimination in a series of dialogues—“Courageous Conversations”—with a diverse audience of youth. One Asbury resident fled the Holocaust as a little girl; another was imprisoned in a Japanese internment camp; another joined the gay rights movement when her daughter came out in the 1980s.

“The whole point of this is to show the kids that other people have been through some pretty difficult times, and these people lived through it ... and to try to give them a sense that, yeah, they may be getting harassed, they might be going through some difficulties, and maybe there’s a constructive way that they can handle what’s happening to them,” Garman said.<sup>54</sup>

Zahra Riaz, 18, who immigrated to the United States from Kuwait eight years ago and wears a hijab, was called “towel head” and “terrorist” by kids at her junior high school in Texas. Things have been better since she and her family moved to Maryland, she said, but she gets stared at a lot, and she sometimes feels unsafe.<sup>55</sup>

It helped to be part of a Courageous Conversation last year, she said.

“Before, I used to think, ‘Oh, this is just happening to me, this is just happening to Muslims. All those other people are lucky.’ But when I heard those people’s stories I thought to myself, ‘It’s not just Muslims; it’s other cultures, too, that have been discriminated against. And it’s not just me, one Muslim; it’s many Muslims who have been impacted.’”<sup>56</sup>

Riaz is particularly grateful for some advice she got from the survivor of the Japanese internment, who’s now 90.

“She said, ‘Don’t be bitter in life. You’ll go through a lot of things; people will try to break you. But you have to try to be positive, and you have to move on with a smile on your face.’”

“Before that, whenever somebody would call me a terrorist, I would respond; I would say something demeaning as well. But then after that when there were times where somebody was staring at me for too long or looking me up and down, I would just ignore them. I would just smile at them.”

“So that was the biggest impact that that whole thing had on me.”<sup>57</sup>

## “She gave me back my motivation”: Youth in service to elders

When she was in her mid-80s, Kusum Lele lost interest in everything.

“I love my Indian classical music,” said Lele, a retired geneticist who lives in New York City and is now in her early 90s. “I used to listen to it all day.”<sup>58</sup>

But for five or six years, “I could not stand it,” she said. “I would not get up to turn my stereo on.”<sup>59</sup>

She wasn’t going out much, either. She’d once enjoyed eating lunch and knitting at a nearby senior center, but now, the noise there irritated her and walking was getting harder and harder.

She was still making it to the doctor, however, because she’d connected with DOROT, a nonprofit that serves elders in Manhattan and suburban Westchester County. Whenever she scheduled a new appointment, she’d call DOROT, and a social worker there would book a staff member to escort her.

One day in 2015, the social worker called with a proposal.

“She said, ‘There is a young girl, about 24 ... she works, but on Saturdays she can visit you for one hour,’” recalled Lele, who never married or had children.

“I said, ‘I like that! I like to be with young people.’”<sup>60</sup>

The “young girl” was Lian Zucker, a recent Yale graduate who’d signed up to volunteer for DOROT’s “friendly visiting” program.

And as soon as Lele met her, she began to come back to life.

“The first time she came, we were non-stop talking,” Lele said.<sup>61</sup> “Oh my gosh, she had so much enthusiasm!”<sup>62</sup>

They talked about India, where Lele was born and raised. They talked about Israel, where Zucker was born, and California, where she grew up. They talked about their careers, their families, and what they liked to cook.

The next week, Lele turned back on her music.<sup>63</sup>

## How do elders benefit from intergenerational programs?

Elders consistently benefit in the following ways from well-run intergenerational programs, according to research:

- **They become less isolated and feel less lonely.** Elders who were previously cut off from their communities find connection and companionship.
- **Their mood and self-esteem improve.** As they help kids, elders are reminded of their competence and achieve a renewed sense of purpose.
- **They gain skills and knowledge.** Kids introduce elders to new technology and cultural phenomena.
- **They get more exercise.** To keep up with kids, elders have to keep moving, which, in turn, boosts their cognitive, mental, and physical health.
- **They receive practical assistance.** Young people help elders with chores and errands.
- **Their perceptions of young people change.** Elders feel more comfortable around kids and more invested in their wellbeing.
- **They make friends and have fun.** New relationships and experiences enrich their lives.

“She gave me back my motivation, because she is young, enthusiastic,” Lele said. “Lian is wonderful. Wonderful, I tell you!”<sup>64</sup>

Zucker values the relationship, too, she said.

“All my friends know about Kusum. Everyone at work knows about Kusum. Some people say things to me like, ‘Oh yeah, you’re a saint,’ and I say, ‘No, no, I’m really not a saint! I do something really, really fun every Saturday.’”

“We come from extremely different backgrounds, we grew up in different times—and our relationship just has nothing to do with all that,” Zucker said. “We lose ourselves.”

“I feel like I’ve known her my entire life.”<sup>65</sup>

\*

Since meeting Zucker, Lele has tapped into even more services from DOROT.<sup>66</sup> Four times a year, around Rosh Hashanah, Thanksgiving, Martin Luther King Day, and Passover, the organization sends a volunteer—or a whole family of volunteers—to her apartment bearing a package of food and treats. On her birthday, volunteers visit with a cake. And every other week, a volunteer or a staff member takes her to the supermarket in her neighborhood to help her stock up on fish.<sup>67</sup>

DOROT, which means “generations” in Hebrew, was founded in 1976 by a group of Columbia University graduate students and alumni who had befriended some isolated elders near campus. These days, the organization marshals 7,000 volunteers—many of them children, teens, and young adults—to serve 3,000 elders annually, according to Mark Meridy, its executive director.<sup>68</sup>

“Social isolation and loneliness really have devastating consequences, and what our programs largely do, for many, is they provide a sense of purpose,” said Meridy. “They provide a sense of purpose for the older adults as well as the volunteers.”<sup>69</sup>

DOROT also operates a summer internship program that allows high school and college students to spend time with elders and explore the field of aging services.

“I try to convey that regardless of what your interests are ... with the demographics being what they are, there is job security in the field of aging,” said Meridy.<sup>70</sup>

For many students, the experience is transformative.

“I love to talk to our interns at the beginning of their internship ... and then I like to talk to them at the end,” Meridy said. “You can just see that at the end of their participation here, they have been seriously impacted by the people they’ve been able to meet. They have a much greater appreciation for the challenges that older adults have had to deal with over the course of their lives. They have a much greater appreciation for things that they take for granted day in and day out.”

“They have learned from the older adults, but they have also had the opportunity to teach the older adults. It is really a mutually beneficial relationship that has been established.”<sup>71</sup>

## **“Everybody has something to give”: Young and old in collaboration**

Some intergenerational initiatives galvanize elders to serve kids; some galvanize kids to serve elders.

“AGE to age” galvanizes each to serve the other and to tackle their community’s most pressing problems.<sup>72</sup>

In rural northeastern Minnesota, where the program operates, only 322,000 people occupy an area the size of nine eastern states put together.<sup>73</sup>

“We have a lot of lakes and trees between people,” said Lynn Haglin, vice president of the Northland Foundation in Duluth, which, with a population of 87,000, is the region’s largest city by far.<sup>74</sup> Everyone else is scattered into 67 small towns.<sup>75</sup>

About one-third of the area’s residents are 55 and older, and a lot of their kids and grandkids have moved away.<sup>76</sup> In a survey conducted by Northland in 2007, many elders reported that they were utterly isolated from the young people in their town, a situation that upset them deeply.

“They wanted more opportunities to be involved in their communities, and especially with young people,” Haglin said. “But they had no way of connecting with them.”<sup>77</sup>

Meanwhile, kids needed help. About one-third of the kids in the region are poor or nearly poor, according to Haglin, and many of their parents have to work long hours at multiple jobs.

“They’re just trying to survive every single day,” she said.

Throughout the region, young and old needed to unite, the staff at Northland concluded, but a program that worked in one hamlet might not translate well to another, they thought. So, in 2008, the foundation created AGE to age, which, instead of prescribing intergenerational solutions, empowers communities to create their own.

Here’s how it works.

The foundation invites a community, through its local leaders, to sign on as an AGE to age site. Staff members then work intensively with a team of 20 or so kids, elders, educators, and other officials to identify local needs and opportunities. What problems are elders facing? What problems are kids facing? What are the community’s biggest challenges, and what are its hopes and dreams?

Each team then receives staff support and seed money from Northland to bring its ideas to life. For example, in Moose Lake, townspeople passionately wanted to resuscitate the local after-school program, which had been flagging due to budget cuts. As a result, kids were missing out on opportunities for enrichment, and it was harder for parents to get in a full day’s work.

As residents came together for AGE to age meetings, they realized that the community’s elders were well equipped to save the program: they had the time and know-how to run it, and they were willing to work for free. Now, elders report at the end of every school day to teach kids skills such as sewing, knitting, painting, and gardening. A different activity is offered every afternoon, and every six weeks, the whole menu changes.

The AGE to age team in Moose Lake also set out to revitalize a blighted park. After eight years and thousands of volunteer hours, “Generations Park,” as it’s been christened, is the crown jewel of the community, with a butterfly garden, a pavilion, picnic tables, and a farmer’s market.

In another AGE to age town, Two Harbors, elders said they were having trouble with technology, and kids said they could step up to help.

Now, at regular “Tech and Coffee” get-togethers, kids teach elders whatever they want to know, such as how to text, how to Skype, and how to set up a Facebook profile and upload photos and videos to it.

“Seeing their eyes light up and seeing them smile because they can finally share experiences with their family is kind of an amazing feeling,” said Drew Christensen, 21, who helped launch Tech and Coffee a few years ago, when he was in high school.<sup>78</sup>

Often, elders would tell him “the stories behind the pictures,” which he was honored and interested to hear, he said.

## How to unite young and old in small towns: Lessons from rural Minnesota

Since launching AGE to Age in 2008, the Northland Foundation has perfected a straightforward, six-step process to spark and support intergenerational movements in rural communities. In every town and at every step, “the key to success is rallying the people,” according to the foundation’s vice president, Lynn Haglin.

1. **Build an intergenerational team.** When Northland brings AGE to Age to a new town, staff members first engage a diverse group of youth, elders, educators, public officials, and nonprofit and business leaders to brainstorm about the community’s needs and commit to finding ways to address them. The team selects a captain and finds a local organization to serve as its hub.
2. **Conduct fact-finding.** With support from Northland, the team gathers detailed information about the challenges facing local youth, local elders, and the community as a whole. The team also assesses the town’s assets and identifies the formal and informal ways in which youth and elders are already coming together.
3. **Hold a Speak Out.** Northland helps the team plan a community dialogue at which residents of all ages speak out about the past and the present. Usually, the dialogue focuses on a specific question, such as “How is being a teenager different than it was 50 years ago?” A multigenerational panel gets the conversation rolling; refreshments keep the mood festive.
4. **Create a vision and action plan.** The core team reconvenes to imagine how local youth and elders can help one another and the community. The team names itself (in one town, the group is “Gathering Generations for Greatness”) and, with guidance from Northland, creates a list of both small and large goals.
5. **Move to action.** Tapping into the talents and energy of as many community members as possible, the team works toward some of the small goals on its action plan; meanwhile, Northland provides seed funding and guidance. After a year or two, the team may have achieved tangible results and enough capacity to begin tackling its more ambitious goals.
6. **Keep it going.** Change takes time. As the team continues to implement its action plan, Northland helps it celebrate victories, recover from setbacks, strategize, and grow.

“Rather than having just a family member help them out, they’re coming to a total and complete stranger. And they don’t know what will happen; they’re kind of trusting me a little bit,” he said. “It’s an amazing feeling.”<sup>79</sup>

According to Haglin, elders and kids have benefitted equally from AGE to age, which, so far, has engaged 6,700 people in thirteen towns and on three Indian reservations.

“We have a stereotype that kids don’t want to be with non-related older adults, or that older adults don’t want to be with teens,” Haglin said. In reality, when young and old come together, “the years drop away” and relationships bloom.

Both groups have also relished the chance to take more responsibility for their communities.

“Everybody has something to give,” Haglin said. “It’s just about helping them figure out what that is.”<sup>80</sup>

### **“You just laugh all day long”: The joy and promise of shared sites**

Many of the youngest Americans attend daycare. So do many of the oldest.

What if kids and elders who needed care during the day spent this time together rather than apart?

Sister Edna Lonergan first began to ask that question in the early 1980s, when she was running an adult daycare center in Milwaukee that employed mainly single moms.

“So when the schools were closed, I lost all my staff,” recalled Lonergan, who’s both a nun and a nurse. “They had to be home taking care of the children.”

“So I said, ‘Well, bring them in.’”<sup>81</sup>

Some of her staff members also had babies and toddlers, and Lonergan welcomed them, too.

Then she tried an experiment.

“We took our babies over to our sisters who were the most frail—the most frail—and we put the babies in their arms.”

“A couple of them started to cry. Not the babies. The adults. They looked at that baby in their arms and said, ‘I used to be a really good teacher. Or, ‘Can I really hold this baby? Can I rock this baby?’”<sup>82</sup>

That’s how Lonergan got the idea for the St. Ann Center for Intergenerational Care, which she opened on Milwaukee’s south side in 1999 and replicated on the north side in 2015.<sup>83</sup> The center, which sustains itself with client fees, private donations, and public grants, serves about 100 children and 100 adults on each campus from Monday through Friday, morning to evening.<sup>84</sup> For little kids, there’s a year-round preschool. For older kids, there’s before-school care, after-school enrichment, a summer camp, and a job skills program. Frail or isolated elders and disabled adults of all ages enjoy music, art, and other activities and receive services such as physical therapy and whirlpool baths.

But what really makes St. Ann special, its leaders and clients agree, is the way everyone comes together.

“This is such a joyful place,” said Casey Rozanski, vice president of fund development and marketing. “The adults bring joy to the kids, the kids bring joy to the adults.”<sup>85</sup>

Twice a day, each campus offers a formal activity—a balloon volleyball game, a baking project, or a sing-along, for example—that unites the preschoolers and the grownups. There are lots of special events, too. This past November, each campus hosted a Thanksgiving feast for all ages to eat together, and at each site in December, the children staged a holiday assembly for the adults.

Throughout the day, the generations also mix informally. Each campus has a huge indoor “park” with plants, benches, and playground equipment. Cafes, shops, and health clinics serve clients of all ages and the public. On the south side, kids and adults converge in a swimming pool and at a hair salon; soon, a pool and a salon will be added on the north side, as well as a band shell for neighborhood concerts.

Linda Merrill, who’s been disabled for more than a decade due to multiple sclerosis, started going to the south side campus seven years ago because “just being alone was not a real good idea,” she said.

She was bored and depressed, she said, and “needed something to give me a boost.”

“Someone said something about St. Ann, and I came here and had a tour,” said Merrill, 68. “And I just thought it was wonderful.”

“I had hobbies and stuff, but I couldn’t really get into them. But I came here and they had jewelry making and all those things. And the more I got into them here, I would go home and get into them more at home.”<sup>86</sup>

Merrill relishes being around the kids, some of whom she’s grown close to.

“There’s one little girl who constantly opens the door for me to get through with my walker,” she said. So, one day, she asked the girl what her favorite color was—the answer was pink—and made her a beaded bracelet in the jewelry studio.

“She was very happy.”

Merrill has also made many “really, really great” adult friends.

## How do communities benefit from intergenerational programs?

Intergenerational programs don’t just benefit the kids and elders who participate in them; they benefit entire communities. Research has identified the following ways in which intergenerational programs consistently enrich neighborhoods, towns, and cities:

- **Community cohesion increases.** As age barriers break down and ageism abates, new friendships and networks bloom. Instead of perceiving one another as rivals, residents unite around shared goals.
- **Volunteerism and civic engagement are boosted.** Both young and old help communities tackle critical problems.
- **Public spaces are revitalized.** Kids and elders work together to beautify parks, recreation centers, and other public facilities.
- **Parents are less stressed.** When elders engage with kids, parents have more time to work and care for themselves. Similarly, when youth visit with and assist frail elders, their hardworking caregivers get a break.
- **Taxpayers save money.** A single program or facility that serves both kids and elders is cheaper to run than two different programs or facilities that serve them separately.

“It didn’t take long to get close to different people. You know, you find one, and another and another, [and] pretty soon you have this group of people.”

“You do things with your friends—you play cards, you play games, you take walks, sometimes it’s just laugh all day long.”

“That makes it where you want to get up in the morning and come here.”<sup>87</sup>

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Young and old also come together daily at Longview, a cutting-edge retirement community in upstate New York that was founded in the 1990s in partnership with Ithaca College.

A short walk or shuttle ride from campus, Longview buzzes with students.

“Have you ever gone into nursing homes and you see people sitting around in wheelchairs with their heads on their chests?” said Bob McCune, 87, a retired United Methodist pastor who moved to Longview with his wife a few years ago because they were feeling isolated in their rural home. “And it’s just so depressing? Well, with those kids around here, it’s not depressing, it’s very lively.”<sup>88</sup>

The kids are there for all kinds of reasons. Musicians and dancers stage performances for residents; history and journalism majors consider their life stories. Gerontology students ask them what it’s like to grow old, while budding physical, occupational, recreational, and speech therapists help assess and treat their ailments.<sup>89</sup>

“They have the opportunity of using us as kind of their guinea pigs,” McCune quipped.<sup>90</sup>

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**“Older adults have a lot to offer, even when they’re living in a long-term care facility,” said Ithaca College student Emily Laino. “And just because they’re living in a long-term care facility doesn’t mean they can’t function.”**

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There are also lots of chances for students and elders to simply enjoy one another. The two generations come together for a quilting club, a baking club, a weekly bingo game, Sunday Mass, and an annual prom.

About 300 Ithaca students participate in at least one of the dozens of intergenerational opportunities at Longview each semester, which are jointly coordinated by the facility’s staff and a professor at the college.<sup>91</sup> Meanwhile, Longview residents swim in the college’s pool, use its library, attend plays and other campus performances, and audit any courses they like.

“That sounds too good to be true,” said McCune, who, so far, has taken a political science course, a bioethics course, and two courses in aging studies. “I’m learning a lot and having a great time. It’s just a matter of joy.”<sup>92</sup>

A big part of the fun is getting to know his classmates, he said.

“They’re very good, and of course, very polite,” he said. “My God, they open the door for you and everything else.”<sup>93</sup>

Emily Laino, a senior from Chicopee, Massachusetts, sat near McCune in the bioethics class.

“It was really great to have his perspective,” she recalled. “Sometimes, even in the college classroom, students aren’t really eager to speak aloud, and he had no problem doing that ... It was really great to hear him, and I think the whole class got a lot more out of it because he was able to speak about his experiences.”<sup>94</sup>

Laino, a healthcare management major, has spent a lot of time at Longview during her college career. Once, for an aging studies fieldwork course, she was assigned to visit two residents weekly. One of them, Lucille Tompkins, devoted her days to crocheting baby hats for preemies born at a nearby hospital.

“I was really interested because I liked to knit and didn’t know how to crochet really,” Laino said.

So Tompkins offered to teach her, and they’d work on the hats together during their visits.

“I would go each week, and I’d show her where I was in the hat, or if I’d made a mistake, she’d show me where I went wrong. And she was always really patient. It was a really great experience for both of us, and we became really close through that.”

“She kind of became someone who I would open up to a little bit more. I would tell her about whatever was going on at school—if I had an upcoming exam, or how I did on one, or a project that was happening—or something that was going on in my family.”

“She would mostly just listen, and a few times if I asked for her advice, she would give advice, which was really nice.”

Last semester, Laino completed an internship in the office of Longview’s executive director, an experience that solidified her conviction that someday, she’d like to run a retirement community herself—and ensure that it integrates the young.

“Older adults have a lot to offer, even when they’re living in a long-term care facility. And just because they’re in a long-term care facility doesn’t mean they can’t function.”

“I mean, they have so much to teach.”<sup>95</sup>



### 3. WHAT YOU CAN DO TO UNITE THE YOUNG AND THE OLD

Around the country, kids and elders are coming together for exceptional intergenerational programs that benefit everyone.

But what if these programs were the rule, not the exception? What if every college campus, retirement home, and daycare center welcomed both the young and the old? What if every neighborhood mobilized its young people to visit homebound elders and its elders to mentor struggling kids? What if people of all ages in communities nationwide joined forces for the common good?

Maybe you live in a tiny town. Maybe you live in a big city. Maybe you're a student, a parent, or a retiree.

It doesn't matter where you live or who you are: you can do something to bring the generations closer.

Here are some ideas.

#### **Launch a grassroots intergenerational movement in your community.**

Using the six-step process developed by the Northland Foundation ([www.northlandfdn.org](http://www.northlandfdn.org)), build a team of kids, elders, and local movers and shakers to unite around shared goals. Start with a relatively easy project, such as a community celebration or dialogue, and aim higher as you gain momentum.

#### **Lobby your local government to make age integration a core value.**

San Diego has led the way. Now, local governments nationwide should create programs, facilities, and policies that unite the young and the old. To lead this effort, every municipality should designate at least one intergenerational coordinator and appoint an intergenerational council comprising volunteers of all ages.

Inform your local leaders that intergenerational programs benefit residents of all ages while saving taxpayers money. Find out more about intergenerational governing from the Generations United toolkit "Creating an Age-Advantaged Community" ([www.gu.org](http://www.gu.org)).

#### **Call on organizations that serve the young to collaborate with those that serve the old.**

Chances are, there's at least one school in your community. Chances are, there's at least one senior center. How can the institutions work together? Is there an opportunity for them to share space?

If there's both a retirement home and a college in your community, tell the leaders of these institutions about the vibrant partnership between Longview and Ithaca and suggest that they team up, too.

#### **Challenge your local board of education to integrate elders into every school.**

If you're a student or a teacher, try to get a pilot program going yourself. Alternatively, set up a "friendly visiting" program like DOROT's that deploys students to visit elders in their homes.

### **Urge residents of retirement communities to mobilize on behalf of local kids.**

If you live in a retirement home, tell your neighbors about what's happening at Asbury Methodist Village. What problems are kids near you facing, and how could you step in to help?

### **Urge local foundations to support intergenerational programs.**

Funders should invest in projects that transcend rather than reinforce age barriers. For more detailed suggestions, check out the Generations United publication "Stronger Together: A Call to Innovation for Funders of Children, Youth, Families, and Older Adults" ([www.gu.org](http://www.gu.org)).

### **If you're over age 50, connect with Generation To Generation.**

Do you want to volunteer with children? At the Generation To Generation website ([generationtogeneration.org](http://generationtogeneration.org)), you'll find out where you're needed.

### **Lobby your state government to take on age integration.**

Ask your governor to hire an intergenerational ombudsperson, appoint an intergenerational task force, and convene a statewide summit on intergenerational strategies.

Urge officials to create more opportunities for elders to volunteer in school districts statewide. For example, elders could assist children with special needs by serving on their Individualized Education Program team.

Urge officials to integrate elders into public colleges and universities, too. For instance, senior housing could be developed on or near campuses, and elders could be invited to audit classes.

### **Lobby your Congressional representatives to take on age integration.**

The Older Americans Act and the Housing for Older Persons Act, which fund senior centers and senior housing complexes, could be amended to encourage intergenerational programs in these facilities. There are already provisions in the Older Americans Act to stimulate the development of shared sites, but these provisions haven't been sufficiently funded.

Congress should also support the Social Innovation Fund of the Corporation for National and Community Service, which finances cost-effective, evidence-based volunteer programs around the country.

### **Make new friends.**

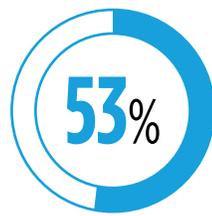
If you're like many Americans, most of the people you spend time with outside your family are roughly your age.

Branch out.

Smile at someone much older or younger than you. Start a conversation with an older neighbor. Throw a party that includes babies, nonagenarians, and everyone in between.

You never know what will happen from there.

# WE LIVE IN AN AGE-SEGREGATED SOCIETY



of American adults say that few of the people they regularly spend time with outside their family are much older or younger than they are.

## Approximately 6 in 10

American neighborhoods skew young or old.



## Negative impacts of age segregation:

- Gives rise to ageism.
- Makes it harder to develop sense of solidarity across society.
- Perpetuates racial, ethnic, and political divides.
- Wastes taxpayer money.
- Denies old and young crucial opportunities to learn from and help one another.

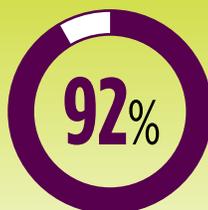
# BUT WE KNOW THAT WE NEED EACH OTHER

## 2 in 3

adults would like to spend more time with people outside their age group.

## More than 3 in 4

wish there were more opportunities in their community for people from different age groups to meet and get to know one another.



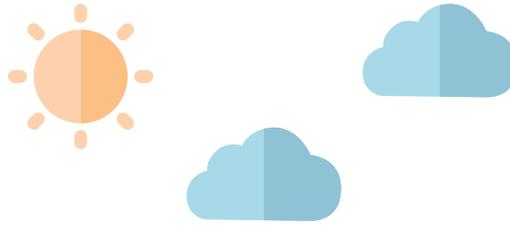
of adults believe that elders benefit from building relationships with children and youth.



believe that children and youth benefit from building relationships with elders.

## Nearly 9 in 10

adults believe community programs that serve kids and older adults actually end up benefiting everyone.



WE WANT  
THE YOUNG  
AND THE OLD  
TO UNITE

3

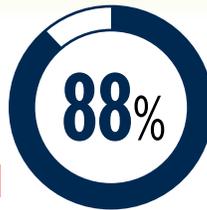


## For example, people want to see more...

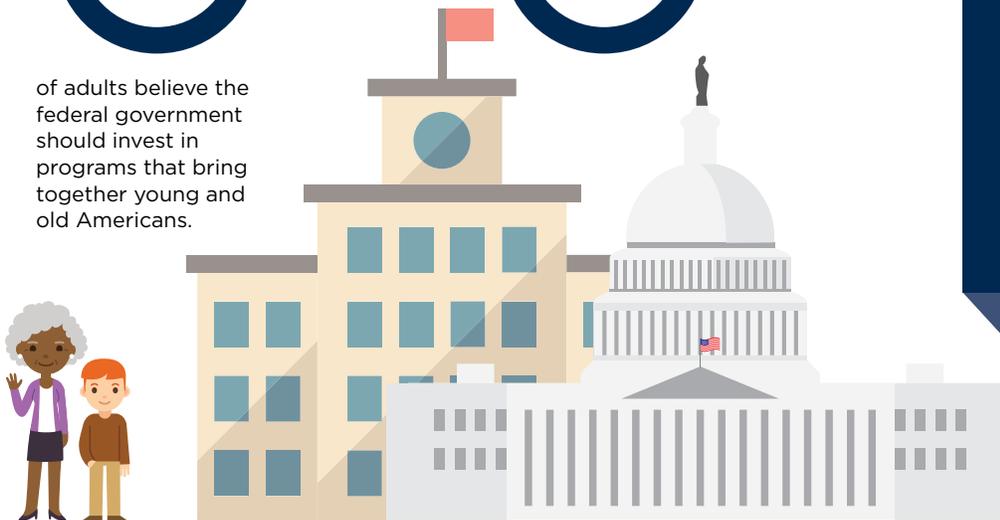
- parks, playgrounds, and recreation centers that cater to all ages (61%).
- elders mentoring and tutoring children and youth (60%).
- youth visiting and helping elders in their homes (60%).
- children and youth teaming up with elders to make art and music (50%).
- dialogues between youth and elders about immigration and race relations (38%).



of adults believe the federal government should invest in programs that bring together young and old Americans.



want the federal government to invest in the wellbeing of both children and elders.



HERE'S HOW  
TO MAKE IT  
HAPPEN

4

## What you can do to unite the young and the old:

- Launch a grassroots intergenerational movement in your community.
- Lobby your local government to make age integration a core value.
- Call on organizations that serve the young to collaborate with those that serve the old.
- Urge local foundations to support intergenerational programs.

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