

WISE ELDER PROJECT

a guide for connecting youth and seniors

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I. Dedication

To all the seniors who are wise and know it as well as to all those who are wise and have yet to realize it.

To all the young people who take time to learn and then share the story of a community elder.

To Helen Pelikan for transforming her vision into a project that impacts the lives of young and old alike.

To my greater surprise I was being initiated as an elder, a sage who offers his experience, balanced judgment and wisdom for the welfare of society.

Zalman Schachter-Shalomi
From Age-ing to Sage-ing

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II. Introduction

In the last 65 years (post World War II), society has increasingly devalued the lives of elders. We have moved away from multiple generations living in the same household or neighborhood, to sending our elders to extended care or assisted living facilities at the earliest signs of disability. Our consumer market stresses youth and vitality, further shoving our elders out of the limelight. Any focus we do have on our seniors is on how best to care for them, on what it is they *need*.



We have, unfortunately, forgotten that they have much to contribute-- to their families and their communities. As Wise Elder Project founder Helen Pelikan, explained:

As a family therapist, I couldn't help but notice that grandparents rarely came to sessions. Today's society has lost the sense of value that elders bring to family and community. And yet, they are now in a place where the requirements of work and income production are lessened if not eliminated and they are freer to reflect and share the wisdom of their years.

Helen was moved by a presentation given by the Rabbi Shakter-Shalome about the value of reaching an age to reflect. Older people are not just people who need assistance but who bring value and can make contributions to their own communities.

For example, seniors could mentor high school students who are starting to think about what comes after graduation. Or retired professionals might contribute their expertise (e.g., financial planning) to those individuals or organizations who need it but may otherwise not be able to afford it.

Such relationships benefit not only the recipient, but also the giver, as a senior realizes that their life is not over even if their career is or their children have moved away. Whether they

realize it at first or not, such projects bring out the “wise elder” in our older citizens, enriching their lives while also encouraging them to find new ways to be a contributor to their community.

This guide shares the experience of one such community that took on such an effort in hopes that other communities may follow and expand upon this model.

III. Background

In 2008, a number of residents of the Bannockburn community of Bethesda, Maryland, found that they shared a desire to live out their lives in their community vs. moving into assisted living or nursing homes. Inspired by a growing national movement to “age in place,” this group realized the need to create a network of support throughout the Bannockburn community. Out of this, they created Neighbors Assisting Neighbors (NAN,) a network of volunteers making themselves available to provide help to their neighbors, and organize events that strengthen the ties between elders and others in the community.

Helping elders age in place is not just about helping them shovel snow, rake leaves or provide a ride to the doctor’s office. It’s also about continuing to involve them in the life and vitality of the family and the community, and empowering them to realize that their contributions are far from over.

In our case, we chose to pursue this goal by building stronger connections between generations. NAN began building partnerships with the local high school, the county public schools, a local community organization and a group of Bannockburn elders to create and pilot the Wise Elder Project.

Why the oral history focus? We felt that oral histories could be a strong first step in building a mentor relationship between elders and young people. It provides sufficient structure for the student and elder to get to know each other, while at the same time building a sense of common ground. This is especially true if some aspect of the oral history focuses on the time of life when the elder was transitioning from being a student to an adult.

The project identified and paired five Walt Whitman High School students with five Bannockburn elders. After an initial training in early January 2010, the students met several times with their partners, obtaining an oral history of their elder. In addition, the project sought to make use of the talent and wisdom of seniors who have much to offer these young people by mentoring, sharing life experiences, listening to the concerns of young people and providing ideas for their growth. The project ended with a celebration at

which the youth presented stories of the elders, and both elders and youth shared the results of their experience. For their participation, the students received, on average, 25 hours of community service credit toward their graduation requirements. The project was repeated the following year with six students and six elders.

Criteria - The Elders

After a “census” of our community’s elders (through a community survey), we learned we had a high number of elders over the age of 80; therefore, for our first year, we used this age for our first criterion. Additional criteria include an interest on the part of the elder to engage with young people, at least a few interesting life experiences from which to draw upon and sufficient physical and mental capacity to participate.

Criteria - The Students

We recommend selecting no more than five or six student participants for a given oral history project.

Because students have usually completed their student service learning requirements by their senior year, we selected from lower grades.

Student participants were predominantly self-selected after an announcement by the principal.

Interested students met with the program coordinators, explained why they wanted to participate, what they hoped to get out of doing so, and their general interests (this last to aid in match-making).

Strong candidates included those with an interest in connecting with or getting to know elders in their community, an interest in history, interest in participating in a community project.

The selection process includes an initial meeting with interested students, at which the project, its requirements and expectations are describe, and questions are answered.

Timing

Be sure to map out an appropriate timeline

Month 1: Project promotion (see below), elder and student selection, matching and training.

- **Month 2:** Interviews and a “mid-term” check-in meeting.
- **Month 3:** Students complete their project and present it at a final celebration.

Roles

In the case of the Bannockburn Wise Elders Project, the program was under the umbrella of a neighborhood organization with a board of directors. All roles were done on a voluntary basis. The board of directors offered suggestions and periodic support in specific roles as needed. Specific roles include:

- Coordinator.
 - Tracks the timeline; ensures necessary logistics happen in a timely way.
 - Serve as a contact and coach to elders and students as needed. While students should be responsible for scheduling and arranging space for interviewing, it is important for the coordinator to communicate periodically with both students and elders to see if any problems are arising.
 - Project liaison to school and any other partners.
 - Serves as moderator/MC during celebration.
- Liaison to school and students and additional resources.

Match-making

When matching elders with students, consider the following:

shared interests

strength of student to deal with a possibly challenging elder personality

The Interviews

In our pilot, we recommended that students conduct at least three and no more than five one-hour interviews. We learned that most students conducted at least five sessions but sometimes more or fewer.



We also learned the importance of getting the basic “vital statistics” out of the way first. This delayed getting into more interesting topics of discussion that lead to strong relationships between elders and youth. Therefore, we now ask that elders fill out a basic questionnaire that, once completed, is given to students at the time the match is made. See the Appendix for an example.

While we provide *suggested* interview questions, our pilot participants-- both old and young-- found that the best information came out of less structured conversations that flowed naturally, enabling participants to explore *together* answers to such questions as:

What were you most proud of?

What was most challenging?

What would you do differently?

Interviews should balance a student leading the interview with guidance from the elder. For example, if an elder realizes the questions are flat or one-dimensional, s/he should feel free to guide the interview. On the other hand, an elder might get so taken with the memories of youth that s/he goes into far too much detail. Coach students with how to address such challenges if and when they occur.



Celebration

The Wise Elder Project conducted a two-and-a-half-hour final celebration at which students presented stories about their elders.

We invited family and friends of the participants, as well as representatives from the partner organizations and the local media.

Some students used PowerPoint, some made a video, some presented a table that displayed mementos of the elder that helped tell their story and one pair played a recorder duet. We gave each student 10 minutes to share their elder's story, after which the elder shared their experience of getting to know the student. We closed with an informal reception with refreshments.



Beyond the program

- Have elders who participated get together to see what might come next. Examples:
 - Jon Thomas & Bob doing a technology session for neighbor elders
 - Lifelong learning opportunities
- Encouragement for the elders and students to connect beyond the program.
 - Ongoing coaching.
 - Usually driven by the elder
 - Attending school events

Appendix

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- II. Elder Information Form
- III. Student Application

I. Project Description

There are many people in Bannockburn who have interesting stories to tell about their life experiences. Bannockburn Neighbors Assisting Neighbors' (NAN) Wise Elder Project hopes to document many of these stories by pairing high school students and older Bannockburnians to enrich our neighborhood history and to encourage intergenerational interaction.

NAN has partnered with Whitman's Social Studies department to match interested sophomore and junior high school students with Seniors 80 years old and older. We anticipate that an individual student and senior will meet at least 3 times at a location they select between November 2016 and January 2017 at a location to be determined by each pair. The student will prepare a presentation that will be shared with friends and family and the Bannockburn community on a Sunday afternoon in February. The elder will receive a copy of the presentation as a memento.

II. Elder Information Form

WISE ELDER PROJECT

*Yes! I am interested in participating as a "wise elder".
Here is basic information about me that I understand will be shared with my "partner student".*

Full name: _____

Phone: _____ Cell: _____ Email: _____

Date of birth: _____ Place of birth: _____ Birth order: _____

Are/were you married? _____ If yes, name of your spouse: _____

When/where were you married? _____

Do you have children? _____ If yes, name(s) of your children: _____

When did you come to Bannockburn? _____

High school? _____ School name: _____

If you went to college, where did you go?

Undergraduate: _____ Grad. Year: _____ Major: _____

Graduate: _____ Grad. Year: _____ Major: _____

Other: _____ Grad. Year: _____ Major: _____

When a young person, what did you want to be when you grew up? _____

What was your first job? _____

What was your career job? _____

Favorite sport? _____ Favorite song? _____

Favorite fiction book? _____

Favorite interests/hobbies? _____

III. Student Application

Name _____

Grade _____

Home phone _____

Cell phone _____

E-Mail address _____

Please write one paragraph about your interest in participating in the Wise Elder Program. A few sentences will be fine.

Please write one paragraph about your general interests that we will use to pair you with an elder

[Inside back cover]

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