Adopt-a-Student program inspires learning and friendship

Written by Kristian Partington

It seems to Marjorie Dibben that some younger people these days tend to spend a lot of time talking on their phones and too little time connecting with others face-to-face. That disconnect may be even greater between younger generations and the oldest, she says, yet there is much that older and younger people have in common. They just need to realize the connections that exist and take advantage of every opportunity to do so.

Conestoga College’s Adopt-a-Student program offered through the Living Classroom at the Village at University Gates – Marjorie’s home– is one practical way for future care partners to bridge the generational divide. Marjorie was happy to be one of the first residents paired with a practical nursing student when the Living Classroom opened in 2015. The fact that they remain friends today, even though Gabrielle Lehman has graduated and is now working as a paediatric home care nurse, says as much about the concept’s success as anything.

The Living Classroom offers students the unique opportunity of immersion in a long-term care home as they study the intricacies of practical nursing or personal support work. The Adopt-a-Student program is one example of how students in each program gain an immense amount of practical knowledge by truly getting to know the people they could potentially serve one day.

Marjorie and Gabrielle hit it off immediately, attending village events together, participating in art classes or simply sitting in Marjorie’s room talking and enjoying each other’s company. Gabrielle says that while little more than an hour was scheduled for the “official” visits through the program, they would often stretch to three or four hours.

The first day they met, Marjorie was in her room going through the mountains of old family photos she has collected over her 96 years, and so began the scrapbook creation that would take up much of the new friends’ time together.

“It’s at the point now where I’ve only met two of her family members but I could probably name all of them,” Gabrielle says. “It’s almost like she’s another Grandma.”

Gabrielle, at 25, agrees with Marjorie that youth today are missing a golden opportunity to connect with and learn from the elders of their communities. She and her fellow students in the Living Classrooms are fortunate to do so, and it will help prepare them for future careers in a way that textbooks and lectures never could.

“It allows us, as students, to get a better feel for the older adult population,” she says, “and no matter where you work in health care you’re going to run into them.” Strong social skills are what set a high-quality nurse or personal support worker above the average, she says, and these skills can only be developed through interaction. Among many things, Marjorie helped Gabrielle understand this, and she considers it regularly as she approaches her work today.

“You just have to remember that every situation is different and you can’t treat every single patient the same,” says Gabrielle. “You have to get a feel for the person and know what kind of angle to approach at.” Age, in that sense, is irrelevant, and an understanding of true person-centredness will serve Gabrielle well in her long career ahead.

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