

A Day in Service Learning - And Making New Friends

By Kathleen Jablonski, Extension Educator, 4-H Youth Development

When you were in grade school, how did you spend your holiday vacation? For me, it was hanging around with friends, visiting family or going to some special activity with my parents or one that was planned by my 4-H Club.

On December 29, 2011, if you walked into the Activities Room at the Grafton County Nursing Home, you would have seen 17 kids spending a day of their break with 15 of the residents. They were working together on the Kids to Kids Projects to create quilts. At the end of the day, nine blankets had been completed to pass onto the Department of Health and Human Services' Child Services social workers in Grafton County. These quilts will be given to youth going into foster care situations.

So what's the big deal about kids making quilts to give to other kids? It depends on your perspective.

If you are a resident of Grafton County Nursing Home, you look forward to any young people coming to visit.

If you are a kid who has come to a family through the foster care system, you know you left your home usually with the clothes on your back and your few possessions in a sack.

If you are a 4-H member, you know the motto of "Learning by Doing" is part of any service learning project and means that you work to learn the skills you need to complete the project to the best of your ability. It is kids making something to support other kids who are in situations they have no control over.

This day's adventures made the quilt count rise to over 200 quilts that have been made in the 9 years since the Grafton County 4-H program joined forces with the Grafton County Attorney's office to start this project.

Before the County Nursing Home residents arrived, organizers Mary Cataldo, 4-H Volunteer, and Kathy Jablonski, UNH Cooperative Extension Educator for 4-H Youth Development, set up the four work areas, with the help of the Grafton County Nursing Home Activities Staff and the early arriving 4-H'ers. As the kids arrived, they signed in, got a name tag and helped complete the station setup. They greeted their friends, met new ones and then listened to the days instructions. "Your job", shared Ms. Jablonski, "is to help the residents tie the quilts". Emergency exits, comfort facilities and introductions were made. Then, the fun started.

So what did the kids do with these elders? They made no sew fleece blankets with the kids cutting the strips and the residents tying the knots. They talked. They smiled. They got to know each other.

If an elder wasn't able to help, they watched. One resident, Dennis, stayed close to where Matt Sargent was learning to pin and match seams for another 4-H'er to stitch. Dennis bantered with Matt, praised him for being "a boy who wants to learn to sew", and asked for a picture to be taken with Matt and his quilt.

Helen L. asked for young Helen Simmons to stay by her side. "You don't find many people your age with our name", she said. Young Helen smiled and continued to help Helen L. tie the quilt in progress.

First time resident participant Mary, kept saying to the kids around her, "We have to do it right – those poor kids need these quilts!"

At the end of the day, as the kids around the room were cleaning up, I spent some time surveying the impact of this day on those who had shared the experience. A smile came to my lips and memories of shared moments flashed through my mind. There are so many to share.

I saw a new 4-H family who had spent the day at one station. The daughters, and mom, had learned the steps to putting the fleece quilts together. The table was surrounded by residents eager to help. By the end of the day, the Simmons girls were showing other 4-H'ers how to set up quilts for construction.

Zach Moore, an 11 year old boy who is learning to sew, was teamed with Sunny. She sat with him *all day* as he stitched heavy weight fleece squares into a quilt top, pinning, talking to him, helping him to learn how to guide the fabric through the machine. By the end of the day, Amy Moore, Zach's mom, said "I've never seen him so focused". Sewing will be added to Zach and sister Grace's 4-H project work... and an occasional visit to their new friend, Sunny.

Part of my family was visiting from Connecticut. My grandson, Riley Bielefield-Roberts, made a new friend, stitched squares together with Elizabeth Stoddard's help, and learned how to use an iron. His 4 year old sister, Caroline, learned how to tie, found pinning challenging and loved dancing and singing for her new elder friends. Daughter Jane Bielefield was one of the five adults who stayed for the day to help out.

Adam Cataldo and his sister, Hope, worked with Abbie Sargent to complete a "rag" quilt that was started at the last workday. Several residents helped lay out the quilt and pin the rows together.

Therese Cataldo, Grace Moore and a number of residents worked at another station making tied quilts. They spread, smoothed, lined up, trimmed, and cut the fringe. Then they helped their elder friends line up around the table to find the matching fringe to tie the blanket together. Therese, a four year veteran of the work day, was in charge of quality control and took her job very seriously.

The lunch break provided the 4-H'ers and residents a change of pace: a buffet lunch, choice of flavored milk products and dining at communal tables with the new friends. When asked, resident Earl answered Activities Team member Michele, "No, I don't want to go back to my floor. I want to eat here with the kids". He stayed for the entire day.

When all was said and done, 8 tied quilts and 1 stitched quilt were completed and 3 sewn tops ready to finish at the next work day. And there were smiles - smiles of pride in the finished products, smiles in sharing the experience, smiles about making new friends and smiles about learning to make a difference in the life of a child. You don't need to be a 4-H member or family to participate - to be part of the smiles, the friendships and the fun. Donations of 2 yard lengths of fleece for the next quilt day will be gladly accepted. Folks can come and help in the day's work as well. For more information about UNHCE's 4-H Youth Development program or to volunteer for a Kids to Kids work day, contact the UNHCE office. Call (603) 787-6944 or email: grafton@ceunh.unh.edu.

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