

## Mennonite “elders” connect with inner city “youngers”

**Angeline Schellenberg**  
ChristianWeek Columnist  
angeline\_schellenberg@yahoo.ca



**T**welve inner-city kids have received a wonderful gift: an extra grandparent.

For the past two years, seniors from Portage Avenue Church (PAC) have picked up a dozen nine to 16-year-old children from Winnipeg's north and west end every other Thursday night. At the church, they share a meal prepared by one of PAC's small groups, then break into groups of two “elders” with two or three “youngers” to enjoy a shared interest such as woodworking, baking, sewing or driving remote control cars.

Elder Adina Sukkau, a retired educational assistant and a grandmother, taught her youngers to knit, which she found calmed them. “We didn't succeed much with the knitting,” Sukkau says, “but were able to share some time together.”

Janice Penner and her

youngers usually baked together. “They always got to take what they baked home to their families,” she says, adding, “The best times were when I had only one girl, and we could walk and talk.”

PAC's Elders and Youngers program grew out of Janice's daughter's Booth College social work project: design a program where the church meets a need in the community.

Cheryl Penner, a Living Bible Explorers (LBE) leader since 2001, had introduced a retired voice teacher from PAC (Rita Schmidt) to a 10-year-old girl from LBE. They've been meeting for free voice lessons ever since. With the success of that relationship “brewing around” in her head, Penner wrote a proposal to link her Mennonite church's predominantly older population with the relational needs of the inner-city youth so close to her heart.

“At LBE, I saw how much it helped the kids to have an adult outside of their situation who showed care,” says Penner, who believes in “the importance of learning skills

from generations before. Elderly people want to contribute, and they have the time.”

Her project got an A and the attention of associate pastor Edgar French.

French says, “My goal was to work with the strengths of this congregation. Cheryl's proposal was bang on.”

From PAC's small groups he formed a core of seven mentors. Together with LBE director George Hill, French says, “We sat down with his staff and came up with a goal to connect with kids who don't have a godly influence in their families.”

Hill's dream is that through this program the children “get a full view of family.”

“There are incomplete family structures all around the kids,” he says. The elders are “all grandma and grandpa figures; these are stable families that have been together for years.”

Elders build relationships beyond the Thursday night meetings. Last year, elders hosted a family night where youngers invited their guardians and siblings to PAC

for pizza and a magic show by PAC member Michael Vandennenden. For their wind-up, Jack and Janice Penner (who met as LBE club leaders in the 70s) hosted a wiener roast and bocce ball game at their home. Janice has taken her girls to The Forks and the zoo and connected with them on Facebook.

Though only seven seniors participate directly in the program, the entire church is invested. Sukkau says her small group was “wonderful in supporting us in prayer and asking us how it went each week.” French says he's observed “tremendous growth in [the elder's] reliance on the community.”

Sukkau says she's seen growth in the youth as well. “They've come to trust us—that we would not disappear from their lives and not give up. My greatest blessing is being able to pray for them.”

*Angeline Schellenberg is a freelance writer and part-time MB Herald copy editor. She holds a master's degree in biblical studies from Providence Theological Seminary.*