

Community shares creativity, heartfelt messages

By Joanne Kitsos

More than 1,000 older adults in 12 assisted living residences and nursing homes – from Uptown to Rogers Park – will receive a special fun, poetic or heartfelt message next week from volunteers who participated in Edgewater Village’s Valentine Card Giving Program.

But that’s just part of the story. The untold part is of the more than 46 generous volunteers who kindly created the valentines and wrote funny or thoughtful notes to the recipients.



One heartwarming story is of **Nancy Bujnowski** who asked if she could “adopt” one of the building whose residents would receive cards. Which is how all 56 residents at Nathalie Salmon House, an intergenerational facility at 7320 N. Sheridan Rd. in Rogers Park, received special valentines that Nancy and her daughter, Julie, created. (*photo above*)

Sometimes individuals got together for a group project; some of these were planned; others were by happenstance. Here’s a far-reaching story -- all the way to California – and another that’s local, but humorous in how the project reached out to neighbors.

Group effort

Lauren Simon created 50 handmade cards and 40 printed cards with the help of her cousin, Merle, who lives in California. She also enlisted the help of children of a friend who lives in Buffalo Grove – Henry, 5, and Emily, 3 – and her neighbors. Lauren designed collages from mixed media that was donated. Merle made cards, neighbors donated supplies and a relative donated printing.



“It was a group effort,” Lauren said. “Lots of people contributed to the success of the venture and I know they were all happy to be giving back to older adults in our community.”

An unexpected group effort involves **Neena**, who read about the program on the Chicago Public Library website. She started making cards in the lobby of her building one night, using the materials in the craft bags that were available at the Edgewater Branch. The project piqued the interest of her neighbors and building concierges, so they joined in. Neena worked from night until morning and said, “I had a great time. No food, but I was nourished by the joy of creating valentines for our seniors.”

Students participate

Under the direction of instructor **Maria Ambre**, who teaches visual arts at Senn High School, IB Honors Program students – all juniors -- took another creative approach in making valentine cards.

Maria said, “After the winter break, students worked on skill building. They practiced complex color mixing and watercolor techniques such as wet on wet and the more washy-looking effect of watercolor.” Students created 30 original cards with a sweet or funny valentine theme; the text inside ends with “Love, Senn High School.” (photo at right)



Maria said she read about the valentine card initiative in the 48th Ward newsletter and that inspired her to involve her students. “I think it’s important for my students to know what opportunities are available surrounding our school community area so that they are aware and can get involved as much as possible to pull out of this slump we are all in,” she said. “It’s really important for them to think outside themselves and who their greater community is to help keep things in perspective.”



The valentine card project resonated with other teachers and children as well. One student or more at Sauganash Elementary School made cards using some materials from craft bags at the Edgewater Branch. The message on the cards was “Happy Valentine’s Day from me and my classmates at Sauganash School.” The Sauganash neighborhood is several miles away from Edgewater, so this was an unexpected and welcome card donation. (photo at left)

The card program also interested **Young Park**, adult services librarian at Albany Park Branch. She was so taken with the initiative that she’s planning to start a card program at her library this year and has gotten start-up details from Katy Linehan, adult services librarian at Edgewater Branch and co-chair of Edgewater Village’s Card Giving Program. “These examples are another tendril of our program that have reached different corners of the city and moved people to respond,” Katy said.

In another show of support from a teacher and her students, 308 cards were made by **Katie McCarthy’s** K-8th grade art classes at Northside Catholic Academy. “It felt great to participate and give back with a kind message for our neighbors,” Katie said. She explained that the younger children colored or drew pictures for the cards; the upper grades were at liberty to use their creativity. “I described the situation to them and said that this activity was an act of kindness and small actions can make a difference and bring joy to someone’s day.”



Josephine Chaparro, co-chair of the Card Giving Committee for Edgewater Village, agrees. “Joy in giving is what this program is all about,” she said. “It also was a joy to see how this project came to fruition with so much inspiration and originality and how it touched so many people.” This year, 47 people volunteered with card donations compared to 29 last year. “We’re hoping to top last year’s number of cards; we’ll report on the final count in the Feb. 24 issue of the newsletter,” Josephine said.

Volunteers from Edgewater Village Chicago have created and distributed valentine cards for older adults for five years, but it's during the last two years, with the support from the community, that the program has surpassed expectations.

"Card writing is an easy thing for people to do at home and this project seems to have tapped into a deep well of compassion for others," said Ginger Williams, executive director. "The response from our neighbors to donate their time and talents has been extremely rewarding. It means we're able reach out and spread the joy of friendship and caring to more older adults -- who are often isolated -- in our community."



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