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## What age is old?

PS 53 fifth-graders are learning how to treat their elders in the Prejudice Reduction Program  
By DIANE LORE

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- In teacher Janine Cassella's fifth-grade classroom at PS 53, students are listening intently to Josephine Regina as she talks about stereotypes.

In this day's lesson, the 10- and 11-year-olds are drawing pictures of "old" people and making a list of what "old" people like to do. Then they will play a game called "Guess My Age."

"What age is old?" Mrs. Regina asks, standing in front of the blackboard. "Is your brother or sister old; your parents, or grandparents? Does anyone know at what age our government says we're old?" Mrs. Regina asks the students.

The students in the Bay Terrace school are participating in the award-winning Prejudice Reduction Program. The intergenerational program created by the Community Service Society's Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) partners with several borough schools.

Trained older adult volunteers visit third, fourth, and fifth-grade classrooms one day a week in 12-week cycles to help reduce prejudice and to build a respect for human differences. The children work in small groups, each with a volunteer. They use workbooks, drawing upon exercises, videos, puppet shows and role-playing to explore the topics.

Seated in small student groups are four other volunteers -- Norma Lee, Angela Kleinrock, Amy Madonna, and Chrisida Howard.

Mrs. Regina asks the students to list the characteristics of "old people," which she writes on the board.

"They have wrinkles and white hair," says one student.

"They use canes and walkers and get sick a lot," says another.

"They wear glasses and can't hear too good."

"They play bingo and knit a lot."

"Wait, you forgot to mention that they're always going to doctors. That's my social life," Mrs. Regina quips. But the next moment she is serious.

"Don't you like to play games and see your friends?" she asks. "Wouldn't you walk with a cane or crutches or use some support if your legs hurt? When you get sick, don't you go to the doctor and take medicine?"

"Would you want people to think of you or treat you any differently because you did any one of these things?" Mrs. Regina asks.

"What do we call that?" she questions the students. Several hands shot up. "Stereotyping," students call out. Then Mrs. Regina holds up a laminated card with the word "AGEISM" on it in capital letters.

"Ageism," she explains, "is the unfair treatment of someone because of their age. When we stereotype people we sometimes make them victims of ageism. Young people can be victims of ageism, too. Some of us can be guilty of having stereotypes about young people," she says.

The Prejudice Reduction Program began on Staten Island in 1990 with 15 senior volunteers reaching some 300 students in six schools. The project was expanded to include schools in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan and Queens, and now includes more than 100 volunteers, reaching more than 2,500 students a year citywide. The program has won a Presidential Service Award and has twice won the Mayor's Award for Voluntary Service.

Chris-Ann DiGiacomo has been the Staten Island coordinator for the program for the past seven years. This year, she said, the program has 17 volunteers age 55 and older. She would like to see more volunteers from the borough.

"The more volunteers we can train, the more children we can reach out to," she says.

Volunteers must go for training for two days a week over a four-week cycle, and then be available one day a week during school hours for the 12 weeks of classroom lessons.

Mrs. Regina, 76, a retired bank teller who lives in Richmond, is in her 13th year as a volunteer with the program.

"This is really the most important work I can do," she says. "It's important to reach the kids early. It's the things like name-calling, stereotyping, bullying and lack of respect for people who are different that can flare up. Kids learn to hate and be prejudiced, but perhaps we can teach them a different way." For their part, the fifth-graders seemed to have gotten the point of the lesson.

"It's makes me think about how I look at people and how I treat them," says 10-year-old Chris Coughlin.

His classmate Jenna Russo, 10, agrees. "It's real easy to stereotype people if you don't know any better," she said.

Ms. Cassella, the classroom teacher, says she's noticed a difference in her students since they began the Prejudice Reduction Program.

"This is great for them to have this training at this age, when they start to notice things. And it couldn't have come at a better time of the school year; it's spring, and all the kids start to get antsy. It's good if they can all learn to be a little more patient and tolerant," she says.

Volunteer Chrisida Howard, a Clifton resident who also serves on the borough president's anti-bias task force, believes the Prejudice Reduction Program should be part of the curriculum in every city elementary school.

"We need to start teaching them young, before they become influenced by their peers," she says. "By the time the kids get to intermediate school and high school, it's too late; they're too influenced by peer pressure."

Principals and administrators interested in learning more about the Prejudice Reduction Program, or older adults interested in volunteering, can call Mrs. DiGiacomo at R.S.V.P. at 718-494-3222.

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