

getting to know **you**

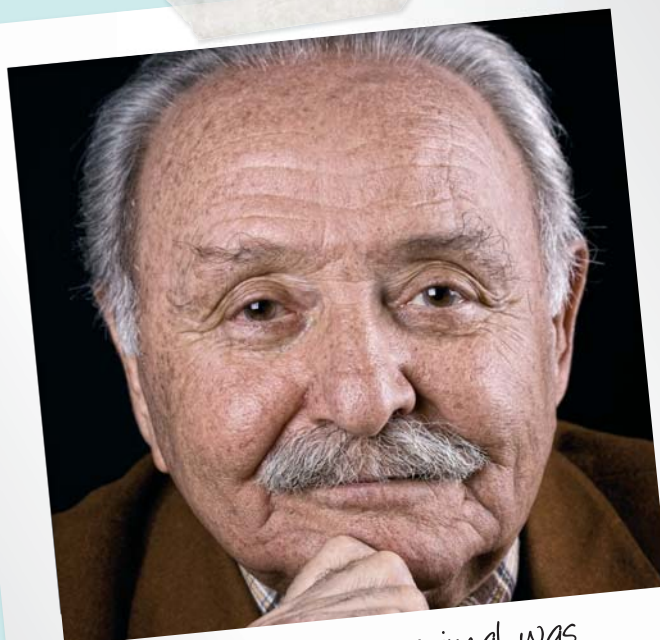


By building a lasting relationship with the school's local care home, children can enrich the lives of elderly residents and begin to appreciate what community really means, says **Jonathan Lear...**

Whether a royalist or not, it was difficult to avoid being drawn into the celebrations surrounding the wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton. Events such as these can have a galvanising effect on communities. Neighbours, who previously may never have exchanged more than a polite hello, are suddenly deep in conversation whilst pinning up flags. Street parties were held all over the country, young and old making the most of their extra bank holidays.

Away from royal weddings, the Olympics or further collective disappointment in the form of another World Cup, this sense of community can be harder to achieve. We all return to our busy lives; time for those around us is limited. This must be felt most by those on the fringes of communities, a sense of belonging that quickly fades as the bunting is removed.

The demographic of the communities we live in is changing. As life expectancy continues to rise and medical advances continue apace, the percentage of people over the age of 65 increases significantly. We are living longer, and for some, with age, comes an increasing need for support. Across England, close to half a million people live in residential care homes (based on Government predictions – 2010). In every town and city across the country, these homes nestle in the very heart of our communities, yet they are often forgotten, only brought to our attention out of necessity.



'My favourite animal was my old dog, Jacob'

As schools, we have a responsibility to work with our wider community, to forge links, provide amenities, to host events. One of the benefits of this is the enrichment of our curriculum. We seek to add more to give our children the best possible experience. Perhaps, in the midst of adding more, there is also a place for giving a little something back.

The aim of this project is simply to enrich the lives of elderly care home residents. It is intended for older children in school (Y5/Y6) who will be carefully selected before the work begins. The by-products, in terms of the children, are both numerous and significant. If our learners are to take their place in their communities as they grow older, they must have a sense of what community really means.

Starting the relationship

Our school is fortunate in that we have a care home on our doorstep. However, given the tens of thousands of homes across the country, this is not unusual, and many schools will be in a similar position.

In order to start building a lasting relationship, you will need to contact the manager to begin a discussion about how your school could become involved.

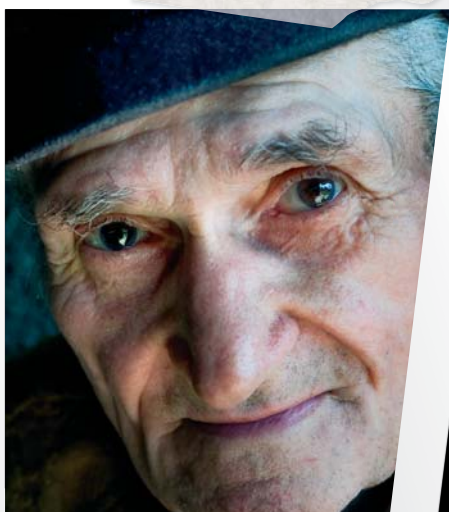
From experience, I have only ever been greeted with positive responses. It is not uncommon for children to visit homes to sing carols at Christmas, but the idea of a more substantial link has great appeal for both sides.

Having made the initial phone call, suggest that you call in for a quick meeting to discuss plans and potential residents who would enjoy the experience. Explain that the project will involve a small group of children who would

maintain regular contact with residents. Rather than going in and 'helping out', it would ideally involve children getting to know one resident in particular over a period of time.

Small groups of children would need to be selected based on their ability to fulfil the role. It's not necessarily something that all children would want to, or be able to do. Equally, parents will need to be informed. The selected children would then be paired up to allow a little mutual support from a friend.

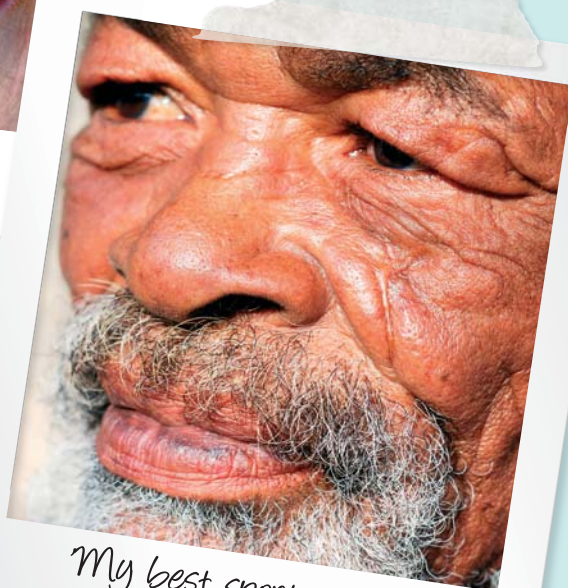
With the permission of the home manager, and also the residents, take some pictures and record a little information about each person. This could be name, place of birth, and something unusual like favourite sweet, or animal. With the information collected, you can put together some pen-



I was born in St Ives in 1923'



'My favourite sweets are lemon drops'



'My best sports event at school was the high jump'

With the permission of the home manager, and also the residents, take some pictures and record a little information about each person

portraits to give the children an idea about who they'll be meeting. If this was done at the start of the school year it could involve the whole class, and as the year goes on, different children would also have the opportunity to become involved in the project.

Discovering life stories

The initial visit to the home will be a nervous time for the children. To help overcome this, it's a good idea to have a structure for the children to follow. Beforehand, the children can create a poster about themselves. They could include information on their family and friends, hobbies and interests etc. – anything that would help with breaking the ice. This visit need only be short, and the children should have an adult from school with them throughout for support.

A following visit can then be arranged with the manager. Most care homes provide daily activities and these present a good opportunity for the children to work alongside the residents. This would be a relatively non threatening way for both parties to get to know each other a little better.

As the relationship between school and the care home develops, it will become easier to plan and shape the nature of future visits. With support, the children might learn about the kinds of activities that the residents enjoy, they might also introduce new ideas or develop mini projects of their own that could be worked on collaboratively over a number of weeks.

One such project could be the making of a book entitled 'My Story'.

Without being intrusive, the children could work with a resident to build their story. They could use a series of prompts that are open

ended to enable the resident to talk about an aspect of their life that they are happy to share. The children could take notes and then spend time in school creating the beginnings of a biography; images could be collected to highlight specific memories, places or events to illustrate the work. It could also take the form of a joint story, comparing the residents life with the child's, including sections on school life, clothes, holidays, toys, etc. This could then be shared with other residents and member of the child's class.

It is well worth investing the time at the beginning of the project to ensure that it gets the right start. Once up and running, it will be relatively self sustaining and form part of the

school's ongoing work in the community. It's sure to provide many happy moments for all involved and has the potential to be a hugely rewarding experience for young and old alike.

Shared experience

OTHER ACTIVITIES THAT MIGHT BE CONSIDERED INCLUDE...

- 1** Asking the children to bring an object from home that has special meaning, this could then be shared with the residents – do they also have something to share with the children?
- 2** Arranging a performance or show. Would any of the children be confident enough to play an instrument, sing a song, or perform a dance that they had learned? They could also involve the rest of the class by inviting them to get involved.
- 3** Visits to school. The children could invite residents to a coffee morning at school. They could bake cakes and biscuits, play music that they know the residents would like, introduce them to members of staff and show them some of the work they've been doing in school.