



Rashi eighth grader Raquel Neiman with Miriam, a NewBridge resident.

Tapping a fountain of youth

Rashi students help memory-impaired seniors at NewBridge

By Lawrence Bergman
Special to the Advocate

Like old acquaintances, they sang "You Are My Sunshine" and exchanged poems they had written about friendship.

This unlikely group of teenagers and seniors became fast friends. But when the students left, their older buddies soon forget them.

The students were eighth graders at the Rashi School, which moved this year to the campus of NewBridge on the Charles, a Hebrew SeniorLife retirement community in Dedham.

On a rainy afternoon last week, they made the short walk to the common area at the Hebrew Rehabilitation Center to work with resi-

dents who have dementia and live in the Memory Support Neighborhood.

Like typical 13-year-olds, they teased and joked with each other as they walked over to the health center. But when they stepped inside, the youngsters suddenly became young adults.

They reached out to the residents, shaking hands and themselves.

One of them, Ari Glasgow, went right up to a woman with



Rashi student Ari Glasgow with his NewBridge friend Doris.

short wispy white hair. "Hi, Doris. It's Ari, nice seeing you again, how've you been?"

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Teens, seniors learn from each other

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Doris, who no longer is able to speak much, was all smiles as Ari told her how much he had missed her.

They stood in a pleasant room with four tables and walls covered in artwork the students and seniors had prepared for Thanksgiving.

"Doris and Ari made a special connection right away with each other," said Julie Wade, the life enhancement leader at the health center.

For more than a decade through Rashi's Mitzvah Makers program, students have been meeting with Hebrew SeniorLife residents. They used to travel from Rashi's previous building in Newton to the SeniorLife center in Roslindale.

Last week's visit culminated the debut of a 10-session academic elective that partners Rashi with NewBridge. The first two sessions were devoted to preparing the students for dealing with memory-impaired seniors, according to Rashi's social justice rabbi, Michael Weinstein, and Middle School Rabbi Sharon Clevenger.

Weinstein said the most important part of the training was teaching the students to speak to the seniors "in a non-demeaning manner, not talking to them like they were mentally challenged, but as adults."

Students also were taught about how Alzheimer's disease progresses to alleviate any fears they may have, according to Nancy Reed, the program manager for the Memory Support Program at NewBridge, which collaborated with Rashi staff in preparing the students. "We also discussed approaches to working with people



Above: Melissa Kaufman of Dedham chats with Rose. Left: Jared Weiner of Newton works with Jody on a mural celebrating gratitude.

with cognitive deficits, particularly those who are difficult to engage. Sometimes a touch, a smile, or even calling their name is a way to get them better engaged and feel a part of the experience," Reed wrote in an email.

The students were given questionnaires before and after the program. Reed said the results would be used to refine the program and gauge the students' progress and comfort level as they work with the dementia residents. "We are hoping to build a greater appreciation of the wealth of information these seniors can share, despite their otherwise visible lim-

itations," she wrote.

To build their comfort level, the students visited the same people each week. "The residents had little or no recollection of the students ever being there, so the kids would reintroduce themselves each time," Weinstein said.

Overall, the rabbi said he was impressed with the way the students handled themselves. "Still," he added, "about half the kids have felt scared and awkward interacting with some of the patients, while the other half want this to continue on."

Wade said residents were informed of the students' visit about

15 minutes ahead of time. "Telling them any earlier, they'd probably not remember it," Wade said, adding that the seniors were told they would be helping the students with their work. "Telling the residents they will be teaching the students gets them excited and able to rise to the occasion."

Last week, students Jared Weiner and Isaac Sebenius shared a table with NewBridge resident Dottie.

"What did you do when you were younger?" they asked her.

Dottie smiled and said, "I was a secretary."

"Cool," Jared said.

"I knew shorthand, too," Dottie added.

While some residents like Dottie were able to chat with the students, others drifted off to sleep or appeared generally unresponsive. But the students did their best to include everyone, repeating their names and encouraging them to get involved.

Besides doing artwork together, the students and residents joined in song, with "Hava Nagila" a group favorite.

The group was then asked to answer a question: "What is friendship?" The residents and students brainstormed together and yelled out words like trust, understanding, laughter and love.

The final part of the exercise was for the students and seniors to come up with poems using those words. The afternoon concluded with a round of "You Are My Sunshine."

Many of the residents who had been quiet came to life and sang along enthusiastically. As the last words were sung and final good-byes exchanged, the sun peeked through the clouds.