



Wencke Rudi, student, Seven Oaks MET School

BY DONNA MAXWELL

a Result for the Ages



Wencke Rudi got a lot out of a film project she recently participated in, and besides the regular skills that go along with producing a documentary, she learned how to share an elevator with a senior.

It's a skill the 17-year-old admits she was sorely lacking.

"I'd be in the elevator going up to my floor and someone would come in, a senior, and I'd be like, 'OK, I'm taking the stairs,'" Rudi said.

"I avoided them, and now I feel like I can sit down and talk with them."

Rudi, a student at Seven Oaks MET School, signed up for the Revere/Reel Youth Age is More film project after seeing an application online. The project brought young people together with seniors living at the Revere-owned Wellington Retirement Residence in Winnipeg to create documentaries on the seniors' lives. The students would learn valuable filmmaking techniques and both

generations, hopefully, would learn about each other in an effort to combat ageism. The approximately three-minute long documentaries are complete, a gala premiere evening has been held and the films can be seen online.

Rudi has no doubt she learned a lot about seniors. She grew up without grandparents in her life, and, like many, she feared the unknown. She said she expected old people to be tired all the time and was pleasantly surprised to discover the 90-plus year-olds she worked with had plenty of energy, were happy and very much not tired.

"What struck me the most was the connection that I got with them," she said.

"The thing that I learned the most was how important seniors are, because you learn growing up how important children are, and how children are the future but seniors were the future and they're representative of the past. They're like living proof of the past. They have all

these memories and they have all these stories."

Ninety-year-old John LaGrow was the subject of one of Rudi's documentaries and he said learning on the Age is More project was a two-way street.

The Canadian Air Force veteran said newspapers and TV news and their focus on the negative had him wondering what the world was coming to, and he had his doubts about the younger generation.

"I was beginning to lose faith in our juniors. If you read the papers and watch the newscasts there's a lot of things to report...I know they only report the bad things, but I was beginning to wonder where our children are going," LaGrow said.

"Thank god they're not all bad, the majority are good and those kids that were here were good kids."

Barbara McGregor, 91, a nurse who graduated the day before VE Day in 1945, agreed the experience with the Reel Youth



participants – some of whom were high school students, others were older – was enlightening for her as well. Logan Nadeau worked on McGregor's documentary, and she was thrilled that Nadeau was proud of his heritage.

"He was very proud of the fact that he was aboriginal, and I'm glad that he's proud of the fact that he's aboriginal," she said.

McGregor thinks the young students may have got more out of their time with the seniors than they even know.

"They asked us our experiences, but I don't think that's what they really wanted to learn, they wanted to learn life skills so they could experience life's experiences like we did," she said.

Agnes Comack said the filmmaking experience made the 94-year-old former nurse, avid writer and artist, take stock of her life – a life that she admitted she hadn't really considered to be much out of the ordinary.

"They made me think about my life," Comack said.

"When you get to this stage in life you wonder what the dickens you've done, and I started hauling out all the things I've been doing and I was amazed."

As she rummaged through the memories, she realized she'd had about 35 articles published in various newspapers and magazines since the '80s, and she reconnected with the hundreds of hand-drawn Christmas cards she's sent out since her retirement at age 65, which is when she took up drawing. And while those accomplishments were impressive, Comack thinks the budding filmmakers were most impressed with her physical ability.

"At 94 I can stretch like nobody's business," Comack said.

She joined The Reh-fit Centre at 65 and went three-days-a-week for an hour at a time until she moved into The Wellington. Now, she attends exercise classes there four times a week. One of the students told Comack she

was so inspired she's now upped her own fitness regime. Comack said she knew she had turned some heads when she put on her gym clothes and showed them what she can do.

"Oh heck yes, when they saw me doing the plank they couldn't believe it, old broad like me," she laughed.

If the students had showed up to learn a little about film making and maybe a pinch about seniors, they likely found they got more than they bargained for with the seniors. Donna Friesen, 94, said they're all glad they've made some new friends, and she was intrigued, if not a little amused, at how the students had their preconceived notions of seniors dismantled a little more with each visit.

"Logan said a very interesting thing at our gala, he said he'd been brought up to revere seniors, elders, but he found that we were an awful lot more fun than he thought we would be, which interested me, it was a different point of view about seniors," Friesen said.

Friesen was a nurse first, before continuing her education and becoming a doctor and said she was always told she was a good listener. But when she teamed up with her student filmmakers, she initially felt a strong disconnect.

"I must admit we didn't really communicate well originally. It took us a while, they were nice kids and very friendly and so on, but we did not speak the same language," Friesen said.

"There was a fair amount of adjusting."

Everything worked out fine, she said, but when it came time to see the finished product, she found herself a bundle of nerves. She'd talked to two young people for hours on end, about numerous parts of her life, and she had no idea what they deemed important and what would make the three-minute final cut.

"It is terrifying though, because all of the sudden two people you have never met in your life are going to put something on film that

will be shown to the general public, about you, and you have no idea which subject they're going to take," Friesen said.

"It's highly personal. You don't realize how personal until you're sitting in a chair and somebody's gonna show you a film about you."

Selkirk Comp student Aurora Gatchell, 15, worked on Friesen's documentary and said it was her interest in making videos that drew her to the project. And while she learned plenty about lighting and editing and interviewing, she came away with an appreciation for the seniors she worked with.

"It was really interesting because a while ago I didn't really talk to older people, they kinda scared me. But when we got to know them, it made me open my heart up, to talk to new people," Gatchell said.

"They're really nice, they have a lot of wisdom. You can learn a lot from them."

Geri Lowe, senior executive director at The Wellington, said by partnering with Reel Youth on the Age is More project, they succeeded in teaching both generations a little about each other, and they shone a light on ageism.

"It's been one of the goals of the project," Lowe said.

"What Revera found in the research is that the most discriminated against groups in our society are young people and older people, so by bringing the two groups together (we're) trying to break down some of the barriers and some of the stereotypes and some of that age discrimination."

The documentaries were screened at a gala evening at The Wellington in October, and the seniors and students came together again for the evening.

"We all had a real high on the night of the gala, even without some booze," Friesen laughed.

The documentaries can be seen at ReelYouth.ca