



Connecting the Generations

By Lauren Quinn, CPRP; Sonya Malinowski, CPRP; and Sandra Olson, CPRP

Walk into Lincoln Park Cultural Center in Chicago, and it will initially feel like any other field house, not only in Chicago, but around the country. It has a dance studio, various art studios, early childhood center and all-purpose rooms centered around a small lobby that's frequently buzzing with patrons. Pick up the class schedule and you'll see many of the usual suspects: senior/adult fitness, preschool, art classes, afterschool programs and teen club. This type of programming segments the population by age group, rather than commingling people of different ages in the classes.

If you had the opportunity to linger in the lobby for a prolonged time, however, you may start to notice something special at Lincoln Park. People don't only say, "Hi," in passing to be friendly; they actually *know* each other. A few years back, the staff members of Lincoln Park noticed that patrons of all ages of-



Teens and older adults participate in a yoga class at the Lincoln Park Cultural Center in Chicago.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE CHICAGO PARK DISTRICT

Although a little hesitant at first, teen club members have embraced the idea of participating in events with older adults.

ten crossed paths in the small lobby space, but they were not getting to know one another. The staff members realized this presented them with a unique opportunity to try to connect the generations.

The Lincoln Park Neighborhood is a 3.2-square-mile area with 34,850 households located just north of downtown Chicago. It is a neighborhood of peaceful parks with tree-lined residential areas, trendy businesses, and upscale and local dining options.

According to the 2010 Census, the Lincoln Park Neighborhood demographics are as follows:

- 11% of residents are over the age of 65
- 12% of residents are under the age of 18
- The average household size is 1.8
- 50% of households have a single individual
- 6.5% of total households are people more than 65 years old and living alone (for a total of 2,021 households)

The Park as 'Family'

This information about the area's household makeup supported the idea that park programs could help to make the neighborhood feel more like a community. Marie, a parent of teens and herself a park patron for more than 15 years, articulated the concept perfectly: "Not having any family in Chicago, the park became my family. It is where I made some of the greatest friends." The field house had



the space and the audience; it just needed a reason to bring the different groups together.

The teen club embraced the idea of participating in events with the older adults. The initial teen-senior multigenerational event was a blues bus tour, during which the teen club sponsored food and refreshments. The event took place on a day off from school, and the teens earned volunteer hours for attending. The older adults attended because blues was a topic they were interested in learning about.

Both groups were initially a little hesitant to approach one another. Through an icebreaker activity, everyone shared what high school

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they attended and one of their extracurricular activities. Soon, the two groups realized that many of the participants had attended the same high school, albeit 50 or more years apart. The older adults talked about how limited their sports and afterschool programming were, and the teens got a glimpse of what their high school was like 50 years ago. Making this simple connection helped to get the conversations flowing.



The initial teen-senior event, a blues bus tour, featured something for both groups – blues, a topic of interest for the older adults, and volunteer hours for the teens.

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Building on the success of the first event, park staff continued to offer other multigenerational programming on select Tuesday evenings during the teen club, as that created a guaranteed teen audience. Some of the special activities offered have included yoga, dancing, plays, potlucks and games. As these groups started to interact, stronger community bonds were formed, fostering the breakdown of various stereotypes.

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and right,” says Sophia, a teen participant.

“It was enjoyable. You have a little competition. It makes you feel younger and act young. I live in a senior development, and it is wonderful to have the diversity of young people,” says Camille, a senior participant.

The park has seen increased enrollment, held community-inspired special events, and increased confidence and leadership skills, particularly with our teenage participants. Park staff has seen this combining of classes as a success not only for teens and older adults, but also for other age levels. Older adults are now invit-

ed to participate in preschool performances and special events. The kids enjoy having people interested in what they are doing and vice versa. Some preschoolers watch the senior fitness classes and cheer their “favorite” seniors on.

These programs have been heartily embraced at Lincoln and the current focus is on how to keep them going. With the groups tending toward different schedules — teens are available after school and seniors prefer daytime — programming can be a challenge. Daytime events on days off school, weekends or holidays have been a way around this issue. Offering something the older adults really want to participate in, such

as yoga, will entice them to come to the park at night. In addition, it is important that events are staffed by enthusiastic people who are familiar and comfortable with both age groups. Another challenge has been finding outside groups willing and able to work with all ages. Sometimes it is difficult for community and art partners to understand that older adults have the desire and ability to do something they have never done.

Lincoln Park Cultural Center has found that holding events with different age groups has created a stronger community. Doing so has also inspired people of all ages to step outside their comfort zone and to grow as individuals and as

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a group. For park professionals, connecting various groups can be rewarding and beneficial to the community at large. When created in the context of already-successful programs, it becomes a much more attainable goal. 🌿

Lauren Quinn, CPRP, is the Center Director for Lincoln Park Cultural Center (lauren.quinn@chicagoparkdistrict.com). **Sonya “Sam” Malinowski, CPRP**, is the Playground Supervisor for Oz Park (sonya.malinowski@chicagoparkdistrict.com). **Sandra Olson, CPRP**, is the Area Manager, North Region for the Chicago Park District (sandra.olson@chicagoparkdistrict.com).



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