

Bridging the Generational Gap

By Ananya Sankar and Alexandra Sumas

For Northeastern University fourth-year Caroline Cullen, being at college doesn't stop her from seeing her grandmother.

"I see my grandmother on my mom's side probably like once every two weeks because they live really close in Winthrop [, MA] and my mom goes there pretty often," said Cullen who is from Newburyport, MA.

"[My mom] always brings her to school to see me just because it's so close, so that's really nice."

Cullen's grandmother, who is nearing 90, is the matriarch of a large family. At Grandma's house there's no need for a formal invitation, said Cullen. As she talks of her grandmother she beams, making it clear just how much this time means to her.

“Everyone shows up randomly and you just do whatever she needs to do for the day... [My mom and her siblings] take her out for a walk or go to the post office, the bank, the grocery store,” she said.

Abby Halder, a third-year student at Northeastern University, echoes Cullen’s appreciation for grandparents. Halder visits her grandparents in Georgia every Christmas, and she is always brought back to memories of her grandmother’s vivacious personality.

“My grandma [in Georgia] is great at trivia, so we usually have a contest with the cousins to see who can beat her. We usually lose,” she said, mentioning that her grandparents have shown her how to have fun even as you get older. “I really want to be like that when I’m their age, I think it’s super cool.”

Grandmother Claire Lieberman from Needham seems to think the opposite.

“They’re full of energy,” she says of her grandkids. “They talk to me about all sorts of things, and I just listen. I like to listen, it makes me feel like ... they depend on me,” she said. “Sometimes I don’t even know what they’re saying to me!”

At the Boston-based non-profit Little Brothers Friends of the Elderly, or LBFE, staff believe that it’s essential to build these friendships between young and older adults.



Richard Santamaria, LBFE's Intergenerational Program Coordinator Co-op

“You end up in a bubble if you only hang around people your own age,” said Richard Santamaria, LBFE’s Intergenerational Program Coordinator Co-op. “I think the neat thing about LBFE Boston is that I’m able to have weekly relationships with people that have way different experiences than me, who grew up in a different America from me.”

He said the organization offers three distinct programs aimed at addressing specific issues facing the older population.

The first program is City Sites, which offers collaborative activities as a way to boost morale and build trust in the community. LBFE staff visit senior centers across Boston and set up activities based on what the community wants to do. In the past they’ve played dominoes, painted pumpkins, hosted bingo, colored, and even had a karaoke night.

The second program, Creative Connections, “is about fostering the creative spirit in older adults,” said Santamaria.

While the previous two programs focus on tailoring activities to meet the older community's need for social activity, the Digital Dividends program is a bit more didactic. The program aims to eliminate social barriers for the elderly in a tech-focused world by introducing them to elements of the Internet.

“It’s about raising tech equity and tech awareness among the elderly population,” said Santamaria. “We go at everyone’s pace and we make sure that we don’t leave anyone behind.”

They provide members of the class with Chromebooks, mice, and a hotspot, which students can keep until they choose to stop attending the classes. While many individuals find the class thrilling, Santamaria has noticed some challenges preventing older adults from developing a positive relationship with technology.

[Link to Embedded Tweet](#)

“There are the ones that we need to spend an hour just making an email for them. That’s definitely a challenge we have, but it’s one we rise up to meet,” he said. “Once they have an open mind, they like memes, they like YouTube, they like playing Candy Crush — in fact, they probably like playing Candy Crush too much!”

With the various engagements older Boston citizens can take part in, the opportunities for intergenerational relationships continue to expand. The only thing holding them back, Santamaria said, is a greater emphasis on hiring bilingual staff and volunteers.

“There are a lot of older adults that speak Mandarin, Cantonese, Spanish, Russian, French,” he said. “My recommendation is if you do speak those not-as-common second languages, LBFE could certainly use you, because we just might make someone’s day and make someone feel more comfortable. That’s part of reducing social isolation and loneliness, because there’s a lot that makes us happy that can make them happy.”

