

New program brings elders and children together



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By Nate Smelle

Staff at the Hastings Centennial Manor in Bancroft have partnered with the Métis Nation of Ontario to create a series of engaging activities designed to foster intergenerational experiences for the residents of the Manor and local children. The first program in the series was launched on Wednesday, July 25 at the Centennial Manor, bringing together children, parents and elders who reside at a long-term care facility. Encouraging the multi-generational assembly to take a walk on the wild side was Katie Ottolini from Zoo to You, who brought a variety of exotic animals from around the globe with her to introduce to the audience. Some of the creatures featured in her presentation included a sugar glider from Australia, a red-eyed tree frog from Mexico, an African hedgehog, a chinchilla from South America and a caiman from Central America. Giving everyone a chance to get up close and personal with the animals, Ottolini shared some background information about each of the species in Zoo to You's collection before taking them around for a pet.

Natasha Hearst is the activities aide at the Hastings Centennial Manor. Thinking of ways to engage the elders at the at the long-term care facility, she came up with the idea to create a series of intergenerational activities that would stimulate the residents of the Manor, while at the same time connecting them with the community and the natural world. With more than 50 people in attendance, Hearst said she was very pleased with the turnout, and to see everyone enjoying themselves during the interactive presentation. "I wanted to come up with something unique to try and find something that was engaging for two very different generations," she said.

"We thought that a zoo coming to us was a great idea because our residents get to stay here, and then the children get to come here and have a great day. We wanted to get the community together, so the young ones and the elders could have fun and learn together."

Robin Simpson is the Métis Nation of Ontario's coordinator of the Métis Healthy Babies Healthy Children/Community Action Programming for Children. Working in collaboration with Hearst, the two have been developing the innovative series of intergenerational programs, which Simpson indicated they plan to run on a monthly basis. As a distinct Indigenous Nation with a unique history, culture, language and territory that includes the waterways of Ontario, surrounds the Great Lakes and spans what was known as the historic Northwest, the Métis Nation is comprised of descendants of people born of relations between Indian women and European men. Simpson explained that the bringing together of children, parents and elders to learn and engage with one another in fun, creative and educational ways is an intrinsic part of Métis culture, and a defining element of the Métis value system. Looking around the room smiling, she expressed how inspiring it was to see the children interacting with their elders.

"The program was formed by a bunch of different people talking and sharing ideas, so it is a wonderful partnership," said Simpson. "We wanted to include our elders with the children because we see great significance in bringing the two generations together. Of course, it is part of our Métis culture to include the elders and the children together. When you see the children talking with their elders it is just so beautiful."

Sue Manembel and her son Thomas were visiting friends in Hastings Highlands when they discovered that the program was taking

place at the Manor on this day. Seeing how excited and interested her son was during the presentation, she said she was delighted to have stumbled upon the event. Acknowledging the value of connecting children with their elders and the environment, Manembel said she and her mother do their best to teach her son about nature as much as possible. It made her happy to see how her son and the other children were having so much fun with the animals and their elders.

?My son loves to spend time outside, and that's one of the main reasons why we love coming up here,? said Manembel.

?We live in Toronto, so we really appreciate opportunities like this to experience wildlife in person. We saw a deer on our way here and Thomas hasn't stopped smiling since then.?

Stating that she was already looking forward to the next program in the series, Simpson said that they are planning to host a picnic in Millennium Park on Aug. 27 starting at 11 a.m.