# CLICK'S Cross-Generational Program: Crafting the "Miracle Drug"

by Linda Mosek

"Demented, lonely, miserly, one foot in the grave" -- these were some of the initial associations of secondary school youth in a cross-generational project operated by CLICK, a not-for-profit in Israel. These students were not being disrespectful, but simply influenced by preconceived attitudes and ideas.

Empirical studies show that children tend to describe the elderly as sad, depressed, and close to death.[1]  At an early age, children learn from their surrounding environment to adopt stereotypes and beliefs, which are attached to different social groups.[2] They copy how society views, feels, and acts towards others and, in general, they take on these values for themselves without first assessing their validity.

Progress in medicine and the consequent increase in life expectancy result in an increase in the number of elderly persons in society today. In what Cox calls a "youth oriented society,"[3] the aged sector finds itself rejected by a social and cultural climate that has no room for them. They feel part of a generation that is stereotyped as sick, tired, slow, depressed, sad, useless, and unable to contribute to society.[4]

As social workers and persons involved in the geriatric field for many years, my colleagues and I asked ourselves, "What can we do to alter this negative view of the elderly in our society, and how can we improve society's attitude towards them?"

In order to change the perception of the aged in our community, we decided to focus on the education system. We therefore decided to develop a social program that would recognize and understand the needs of the two generations; the agenda would concentrate on breaking down the barriers of preconceived stereotypes and attitudes by teaching the two groups how they can work together, benefit from and enjoy one another, and contribute positively to the community at large.

The project presented in this article is one of the many innovative inter-generational ideas created and developed by the CLICK not-for-profit. It was established in one of the three elderly citizen's community centers operated by CLICK, in conjunction with a high school for technology that caters to poor academic achievers. The overall aim of the project was to change the pre-conceived attitudes of the youth towards the aged, as well as alter the status and image of the elderly from dependent, weak, and vulnerable to productive and capable.  In addition, the self-esteem of the students consequently would be elevated, as well as the social image of the school.

## About CLICK

CLICK is a community-based non-profit initiative, which was established in 1983 in Hod Hasharon, a city situated 12 miles from Tel Aviv, Israel. CLICK'S vision is to provide a better quality of life for children from families in stress and for the aged in the community by initiating and developing innovative programs involving the active support of the community.

With the help of Myriam's Dream, [5] a not-for-profit founded in the United States, which has been supporting inter-generational and community projects at CLICK since 1998, the organization currently operates three community social centers for the independent elderly, a day care center for the incapacitated elderly, an occupational therapy program for the housebound elderly, and a craft business enterprise and handicraft learning center. These centers fill a tremendous cultural, educational, and social gap in the lives of its aged participants.

## Rationale Behind the Project

The rationale behind this project was cross-generational interaction of stigmatized elderly people from a day care center for the aged with under-achieving students from a secondary school of technology. The goal was to raise the status of the elderly in the community by sharing activities with these youth and achieve a change in attitudes, among the elderly, on the one hand, and among the youth with low self-esteem on the other.  Through a process of two-way empowerment, the elderly who are considered a burden to society,

*CLICK, based in Hod Hasharon in Israel, strives to provide a better quality of life for children from families in stress and for the aged in the community by initiating and developing innovative programs involving both under-achieving students and seniors with whom they never would have spent time*

*Linda Mosek, Social Worker, BA, BSW, MSW, is the director of CLICK Israel. She is also the manager of CLICK's Day Care Center for Disabled Elderly.*
*linda@roshhelp.co.il*

together with low image drop-out students, changed the situation by joining forces and volunteering together. The emphasis was on reciprocity and building bridges, where both sides contribute equally to the process of evolution. The elderly taught the students about their life-styles and culture, and the youths educated them on the lives of high school students.

There were 15 young participants included in this project. They were 17 years of age, with low self-esteem, often violent, and not accepted into the regular high schools due to low academic achievement and disruptive behavior. There were also 15 elderly participants, aged 60 years plus; with low socio-economic levels; predominantly from Yemen, Morocco, and Iraq; and with no high school education, some being illiterate.

## Program Objectives

As part of CLICK'S continual focus and initiative and to enhance community involvement and development of its projects, the CLICK staff met with a number of teachers, the elderly, and students from the local secondary school of technology.

Conducting face-to-face interviews assessed the needs of the youth in the school and the elderly in the community center for the aged. The students were found to have a built-in fear and misunderstanding of the elderly, in particular those who may be disabled. The aged felt isolated, like a burden, and stigmatized by the community. The overall course of action was to develop shared activities for both the adults and the youth, so as to improve the status of the elderly in the community. The shared activities were planned to achieve the following objectives:

- Change the negative impressions held by the youth about the elderly.
- Bring the two generations together via a joint handicraft project that reduces stress, calms the mind and soul, and contributes to the welfare of the community.
- Promote reciprocal contribution on behalf of the school and the community's club for the aged.
- Provide additional new social activities for the aged and keep them active by sharing resources with a local secondary school.
- Eliminate the violent behavior of the youth and s ubstitute generosity, volunteering, and contributing to the community.

A steering committee was established, consisting of CLICK'S social worker; the school principal, social studies coordinator, and fashion coordinator; students; elderly participants; and the coordinator for the aged. The steering committee met bi-monthly.

## Carrying out the Crafting Project

Crafting was decided upon as a method of bringing the two generations together. A project creating soft fabric dolls was launched, with the finished products to be donated to needy children in hospitals, rehabilitation centers, and day care centers all over Israel.

It was decided that the groups would meet weekly, for two hours, in the secondary school's fashion laboratory to prepare the dolls.

A joint outing, as well as several events during Jewish holidays, were planned to bring the generations together socially.

A joint gift-wrapping of the dolls was arranged, in a harmonious gathering of the two generations.

Organized visits were planned to donate the handmade dolls created in the sewing project to needy children referred by the local Department of Community Services.

Goal measurement was an integral part of the design of this project. In-house evaluation of the objectives was conducted by the steering committee at the end of the project, mainly by qualitative methods such as interviews and feedback surveys.



*Crafting - a method of bringing the two generations together*

## An Inspiring Outcome

Given the delicate emotional state of the students and the vulnerability of the elderly, the sharing and caring connection that evolved between these two differing age groups was most inspiring: – *"Rain, hail or shine, the pupils and the elderly arrived on time and never missed a session."* A genuine relationship of warmth, appreciation, and concern developed between them, whereby both benefited from the connection they had formed.

For the elderly, their status, self-worth, and dignity in the local area was strengthened. This resulted in a remarkable social change, and there was a noticeably improved attitude towards the elderly in the neighborhood (parents, teachers, and pupils, on the one hand, and an enhanced feeling of self-worth, which lifted their self-esteem, on the other).

The program taught the youth to be more accepting, attentive, and patient towards their elders. The teens recognized the seniors' abilities and willingness to learn, and their ability to have fun together. This helped bridge the generation gap, leading to the students totally losing all their fears of, and previous anxieties about, the elderly, and finally finding enjoyment in their company.

The elderly, on the other hand, benefited from being part of the school network. The majority had not experienced formal education, let alone secondary education, and felt elated in becoming part of the education system.

The two partners in the relationship (the youth and the elderly) collectively contributed to the development of community resources. The tremendous satisfaction gained from the pleasure of giving generously to children in need and to the community was almost indescribable!

In their words: -

*"... the feeling of creativity that we gained made us and the eld-*

*erly feel a tremendous satisfaction...”*
*“... experiencing calmness, peace and fulfillment, with a joint contribution to the community...*
*“... we developed special and wonderful friendships with the students; we gained pleasure from the process of creating, sewing and the inter-generational connection...”*
*“... together we sewed material dolls that we donated to children coming from families in stress, many who can't afford toys...”*

The school noted a decrease in violent and disruptive behavior among the girls, and an obvious increase of positive self-image. Working with handicrafts also made the participants feel calmer and more tranquil. The school principal and social studies coordinator concluded that the overall atmosphere in the school had changed for the better, resulting in reduced negative image and stigma by the general public.

## The Therapeutic Benefits of Handcrafts

Joint social events and crafting activities between the aged and the youth illustrate show the younger generation that the elderly are capable of contributing to society and that they possess a wealth of useful experiences, skills, and general knowledge.

Volunteering and contributing to the community helped students with low academic achievement and behavioral problems replace their violent moods with a feeling of "well-being" and an elevated sense of their self worth. Both generations experienced the therapeutic benefits of handicrafts and the resulting calming feeling to the mind and soul, derived from *Crafting "the miracle drug."*

*CLICK was awarded a Certificate of Merit for its "Intergeneration Programs" at the National Convention for non-profit organizations for the elderly, organized by "Eshel," the Association for the Planning and Development of Services for the Aged in Israel.*

### ENDNOTES:
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4 Aaronson, B. "Personality Stereotypes of Aging." Journal of Gerontology, vol. 21, 1966, 458-462.
5. http://www.myriamsdream.org/myriam.htm