

Book Joy with Elders | Reasons to Love Libraries

by [Mary Anne Russo](#)

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In a quiet meeting room at [Hubbard \(OH\) Public Library](#), residents of a local assisted-living facility wait, anticipation in the air. Suddenly, spontaneous smiles light up faces, and lively conversations fill the void as families with elementary-age kids burst into the room. The bookend generations are here for Reading Pals, the intergenerational book group run by my public library.

"I like reading new books each week, and I get to see my friend," said a young participant. The friend? An assisted-living resident who was a stranger when they met at Reading Pals two years ago. The resident is also happy, because, "You know these kids remember me."

A collaboration between Hubbard Public Library and [Elmwood: An Inspira Health Group Senior Care Facility](#), Reading Pals was set up to facilitate meaningful interactions among participants, developing a sense of connectedness and friendship while fostering a love for books, reading, and lifelong learning.

Elmwood activity director Kayla Zoccole embraces opportunities to bring residents engaging experiences, particularly ones that involve children. "They talk about this program all the time," she says.

One resident who rarely participated in activities came to the library for Reading Pals after hearing others speak enthusiastically about it. When a transportation issue arose with Elmwood's van, a resident who was talked into coming the first week insisted they "had to" find a way to get to the library because "the kids were counting on them."

The positive impact extends to participating families. "Because of this program, my kids have started reading to their great-grandpa," one parent said.

"My kids are not around the elderly much. They had fun," said another.

In its third year, the program, which I facilitate with library staff members Dana Tirabassi and Heather Phibbs, is a staff favorite. Words are inadequate to describe the excitement, enthusiasm, and joy that fill the room each time we meet.

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The format consists of four weekly, hour-long get-togethers. Participation is limited to 12 library patron families with elementary-age kids. The families must register, with the expectation that they will attend all four weeks.

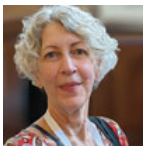
Our library is fortunate to have the financial support of Friends of the Library and other donors, so we can buy 12 copies of each book, which the families get to keep.

At each meeting, a family is paired with a facility resident, and all have the same book. Some establish bonds and sit with the same resident each week; others mix it up. Once everyone is seated, there's time for shared reading and conversation. Some groups take turns reading each page; others let the kids read. When everyone has finished, library staff facilitate activities based on the story.

As it turns out, what captures the interest of school-age children can be equally interesting to the residents. *Seven Blind Mice* by Ed Young inspired us to create a file-folder game where only a small portion of an everyday object was visible, and everyone had to guess the object. With our wide-format printer, we also made a picture and cut it into 12 pieces. Participants colored their portions, discussing what the assembled pieces might become. Arriving at the next week's meeting, they were delighted to see them all together in the library lobby window, forming a colorful picture of an elephant.

Another hit was *Moving Words About a Flower* by K. C. Hayes. After reading this book about dandelions, we tasted dandelion jelly and made "wish flags" for display in the children's room. They were fabric strips where people wrote their first name and a wish. The sentiments were wide ranging. A father: "I wish for my kids to grow up and help others." A resident: "Never-ending lipstick."

The impact of Reading Pals has been remarkable. Many people have joined all three years. A parent shared that, among other positive aspects, they valued "the character traits of kindness, empathy, patience, and respect" that the program supported. I'm not sure what more you could ask for from a program.



Mary Anne Russo has served as children's department supervisor at Hubbard (OH) Public Library for 36 years.

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