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CARING SPACES

Addressing Staff Mental Health and Well-Being

Social Isolation Remedy: Crossing the Generational Divide

Make Family Health & Fitness Day Count!

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Mental Health and Parks and Recreation

Five actionable steps agencies can take to support their staff

By Allison Colman

On December 7, 2021, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, M.D., issued an advisory sounding the alarm on the mental health challenges experienced by young people (tinyurl.com/3vk43u34). The advisory report noted that in 2019, 1 in 3 high school students and half of female students reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, an overall increase of 40 percent from 2009. In May 2023, the Surgeon General issued a second advisory report on loneliness and isolation (tinyurl.com/53tp6emf), noting that before the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, nearly half of U.S. adults reported experiencing measurable levels of loneliness. Both reports called upon a whole of society response from individuals, governments, **workplaces**, health systems and community organizations to implement new approaches that prioritize mental health and social connection.

During this time of increased focus on our nation's mental health, we often talk about the unique role that parks and recreation plays as "social infrastructure" and a vital condition for well-being. While it is critical for park and recreation systems to leverage their spaces and programs to foster connection and belonging across communities, some leaders are growing concerned that the emphasis on community well-being has taken precedence over the focus on the well-being of the park and recreation workforce. Phil Ginsburg, general manager of San Francisco Recreation and Park Department, shares, "We talk a lot about the health benefits of parks. And for good reason — research has established that parks play a key role in a community's mental health. They promote inclusion and access. They put people in touch with fresh air, nature and each other. As parks leaders, we have always been aware of the critical role parks and recreation [plays] in citizens' happiness and well-being, and we've done a good job of spreading the message. But when it comes to our own teams, mental health hasn't received the same attention."

Park and recreation leaders like

Park and recreation leaders are putting a greater emphasis on the mental health of their staff.

Ginsburg recognize that mental health affects everyone and that their staff, colleagues and team members increasingly are impacted by the growing mental health crisis. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, 1 in 5 adults and 1 in 6 young people experience a mental health condition each year, and more than 8 million people provide care to an adult with a mental or emotional health issue (nami.org/mhstats). Park and recreation professionals are not exempt from these issues, with many leaders acknowledging that their workers also are impacted by public health and social challenges they confront in their daily professional roles — homelessness, gun violence, overdoses, civil unrest, mental health crises and climate change.

If we don't effectively support the health and well-being of our frontline staff, then their ability to support the health and well-being of their communities will be compromised.

In cities across the country, including San Francisco, there is no shortage of trauma experienced by park and recreation workers. "The overdose crisis means gardeners and other park workers frequently find sick or dead people. 2023 was the deadliest year on record for San Francisco," says Ginsburg. "More than 800 people died of accidental overdoses, some in our parks. That is in addition to people who die from suicide in our parks and the other painful situations we increasingly encounter, including homelessness, erratic behavior and assaults. On August 18, 2023, a masked person climbed the stairs to the second-floor gymnasium in the Mission Recreation Center, walked up to an 18-year-old as he played basketball with his friends, and shot him. Our recreation center staff found him mortally wounded and called 911. Our workers typically aren't first responders, but they aren't immune from job-related trauma and peril."

Most leaders know they have an obvious duty to support their staff through trauma. Ginsburg acknowledges that the focus on mental health and well-being must go beyond these periods of distress and be a top priority year-round. "Though it wasn't the first time gun violence has touched one of our facilities, it is thankfully rare. Much more common is simply the daily stress that compounds over time and the need for regular employee wellness efforts that value mental and emotional well-being as importantly as physical health," he says.

NRPA President and CEO Kristine Stratton agrees: "Many have heard the airline instruction to put your oxygen mask on first before helping others with theirs. There is clear evidence that human beings can internalize the stressors and trauma around them, even vicariously through helping others who have experienced trauma. Our mission is dedicated to building a strong park and recreation field, and that hinges on healthy and resilient park and recreation professionals. If we don't effectively support the health and well-being of our frontline staff, then their ability to support the health and well-being of their communities will be compromised. This can be a virtuous cycle if we are all committed to it."

What Do Workers Need?

Leading health organizations and federal agencies agree that all workplaces have a major role to play in addressing the mental health crisis. According to the American Psychological Association's (APA) 2023 Work in America Survey (tinyurl.com/3ebndhed), 92 percent of workers seek employers who invest in, value and prioritize staff mental health and well-being. Beth M. Schwartz, Ph.D., associate director for the Office of Applied Psychology at APA, shares, "Investment in the mental health of staff needs to be a priority. Workers want to work for an organization that values their psychological well-being, provides support for mental health and respects work-life boundaries."

The survey found that while there have been many positive developments and trends related to workplace well-being over the past few years, improvements are needed. Lack of mental health supports remains a challenge, with respondents indicating that only 43 percent of employers offer health insurance coverage for mental health and substance use disorder, 29 percent of employers provide access to an employee assistance program (EAP), and only 12 percent of workplaces have people onsite who have received mental health training. Workplace stress remains at a concerning level, with 77 percent of workers experiencing work-related stress in the past month and 45 percent experiencing negative impacts because of that stress, including emotional exhaustion, lack of motivation, a desire to keep to themselves and/or quit, and lower productivity.

The survey found that workplace stress and experiences differ across industry, demographic and other workplace factors — important considerations for park and recreation leaders who have staff serving in a wide variety of roles. People in customer-facing

Leading health organizations and federal agencies agree that all workplaces must help address the mental health crisis.

services were more likely than office workers to characterize their workplace as "toxic" (26 percent to 14 percent, respectively), in-person workers were more likely to report a toxic workplace than those fully remote, and women and people living with a disability were more likely to report a toxic workplace when compared to their counterparts. Twenty percent of workers, and higher rates of Black (23 percent) and Hispanic (22 percent) workers, reported feeling a lack of belonging in the workplace. Workers who identified as 44 years old and older, Black, Hispanic, and LGBTQ+ reported higher rates of lacking support in the workplace compared to workers under age 43, white and non-LGBTQ+ workers.

Actions Park and Recreation Leaders Can Take

APA's survey findings reinforce the need for leaders to take action to prioritize mental health in the workplace. The first-ever *Surgeon General's Framework for Workplace Mental Health and Well-Being* (tinyurl.com/2s3r6x6s) released in 2022 provides a roadmap for how park and recreation leaders can take actionable steps. The framework calls upon workplaces to advance strategies that focus on five workplace essentials:

1 Protection From Harm: Create the conditions for physical and psychological safety and job security. Review working conditions across all positions to ensure compliance with occupational health and safety standards; ensure adequate rest; model, communicate about and promote mental health services; provide healthcare coverage for mental health services; operationalize diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility norms, practices and policies.

2 Connection and Community: Foster positive social interactions and relationships in the workplace to promote social support and belonging. Encourage behavior that promotes positive social relationships in the workplace while protecting against bias, discrimination and exclusion; establish clear and consistent communication; listen to workers' concerns and explain why decisions are made; foster collaboration and teamwork.

3 Work-Life Harmony: Ensure that workers can balance work and non-work demands. Allow for flexibility and autonomy over scope of work and how work is

completed; make schedules predictable; increase access to paid medical and family leave; respect boundaries between work and nonwork time.

4 Mattering at Work: Ensure workers know that they matter, have a sense of purpose and meaning, and have dignity in their work. Provide a living wage; engage workers in workplace decisions; build a culture of gratitude and recognition; connect individual work to the organization's mission and purpose.

5 Opportunity for Growth: Promote equitable pathways for growth. Provide quality training, education and mentoring; ensure workers have the ability to learn new skills and knowledge, experience leadership opportunities, and contribute to an organization's mission; ensure relevant and reciprocal feedback.

Schwartz recommends that leaders start with the strategies that work. "Less than a third of workers say that their employer offers an [EAP], and only 43 percent report that their employer offers health insurance with coverage for mental health. Many organizations can start with the basics — availability of resources and awareness of resources are the best places to start. To address the most common challenges, an organization should consider: (1) EAPs, which provide resources connected to mental health needs; (2) insurance coverage that provides access to mental health professionals like that offered for physical health; (3) adequate time-off policies; and (4) mental health days."

"Workplaces, through their benefits, culture, operations, communications and team building, can play a critically beneficial role in confronting the mental health crisis, especially in the context of social isolation."

NRPA has taken steps to prioritize mental health in the workplace. Stratton shares, "Workplaces, through their benefits, culture, operations, communications and team building, can play a critically beneficial role in confronting the mental health crisis, especially in the context of social isolation. Workplaces offer connection, collaboration and shared purpose, which can serve as an antidote to the negative implications of disconnection and isolation. At NRPA, we approach this responsibility with even more intention, because we have been remote first since March 2020. Now that we no longer can rely upon casual in-office interactions, we are focused on creating opportunities for staff connection and collaboration. Interactive monthly staff meetings, interdepartmental working groups, social hours, virtual co-working time and a strong well-being-centered benefits package are a few of the commitments we have made. We are also proud to be striving for mental health excellence as part of the Mental Health in the Workplace commitment [tinyurl.com/59hr3k4v]."

Overcoming Obstacles

Normalizing mental health in the workplace is not an easy feat. Historically, society has struggled to place the same value on mental and emotional well-being as they have on physical health, largely due to the persistent stigma connected to mental health. Schwartz believes that park and recreation leaders can help to address the stigma. "[B]y making it clear that leadership prioritizes mental health and well-being, and by providing educational opportunities and training to all employees that focus on mental health as an essential part of overall well-being, an organization can help to dismantle the stigma that still exists toward those with mental health challenges and encourage employees to seek appropriate help when needed."

A.C. Gonzalez, former city manager of Dallas and a strategic advisor to the Texas City Management Association and the International City Managers Association, agrees that local government leaders have a role to play in helping to overcome the stigma, guide their workforces and lead their communities. Changing practices and policies is one way to solidify and sustain this effort. "City leaders face these personal challenges, but more importantly, they can do something for themselves and the organizations they lead. As resource managers, we establish rules and procedures to properly maintain the physical assets of our organization. We establish rules by which personnel are required to take care of the tools, vehicles and facilities entrusted to them. Yet, we make little effort to establish maintenance requirements for our personal physical health and, as bad or worse, we do next to nothing to require maintenance of our brain. It [mental health] has not been normalized. And nothing gets normalized until change is introduced and becomes an expectation."

Stratton agrees and encourages park and recreation leaders and key decision-makers to consider what they can do. "I love the Mr.

Rogers quote, 'Anything that's human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable.' When he said this, he was talking about understanding and connecting with our feelings and talking with others about them. Overcoming stigma hinges on chipping away at shame and silence and making our mental health challenges and practices mentionable. Part of this can come from our leaders stepping up."

Investing in workplace well-being not only benefits workers, but also it improves organizational culture and performance, and it is a must-do as leaders consider retention, productivity and recruitment of future workforce. Schwartz notes, "Without mental health and well-being support in place, an organization will likely find it more difficult to recruit the talent needed and more difficult to retain the talent needed for success. When workers are not satisfied with the mental health and well-being support, they are much more likely to be looking for a new job at a different organization. With effective mental health policies in place, workers are less likely to experience workplace burnout and, in turn, are less likely to experience emotional exhaustion, less likely to quit their job and more motivated to do their best on the job. Psychological science also illustrates that a psychologically safe workplace — one in which team members' voices are welcomed without fear of retribution — leads to greater innovation and creativity. We also know that an organization can enhance well-being and performance and lower workplace burnout by building psychological capital, which includes a focus on hope, efficacy, resilience and optimism."

Gonzalez believes this is a unique opportunity for park and recreation professionals to lead by example. "We are forever trying to do more with less. This is a good way to be at our best. We can serve as an example for the rest of the community and do better for ourselves and our loved ones," says Gonzalez.

SEE ALSO: *Reshape Your Workplace: Starting a Wellness Movement Through Affirmation, Voice and Choice, Daniel W. Hatcher, MPH,* Parks & Recreation*, February 2022, Vol. 57, Iss. 2, tinyurl.com/yxjkucxh.*

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From Gen Alpha to the

Fostering intergenerational connection as the antidote for social isolation

By Nancy Baum, M.S., CPRP, and Samantha Ochoa, M.A.

Social isolation and loneliness have been more prevalent topics of conversation in recent years, especially during and following the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. There is an opportunity to reflect on the basic human need to connect and how to create connections across generations. The park and recreation field currently provides programming that spans seven generations, ranging from Gen Alpha (2013-2025) to the tail end of the Greatest Generation (1901-1924) (tinyurl.com/fbwu7dv7). These generations encompass a wide range of ages and life stages that park and recreation agencies consider when programming activities and providing resources. However, those aged 50 and older are at the most significant risk of experiencing social isolation and the harmful effects it brings in its wake.

While reflecting upon work with the older adult population, professionals have seen an abundance of resilience, determination and persistence that has shaped how we interact and socialize. In 2017, NRPA's Healthy Aging in Parks Initiative (tinyurl.com/57u7vntz) reported more than 9 in 10 park and recreation agencies provided older adults with recreational opportunities and programming, making them "a leading provider to this integral portion of the community." Park and recreation professionals persevered through the pandemic to continue providing these opportunities to keep older adults safe, healthy and, most importantly, connected. The opportunities for connectedness that park and recreation professionals offer will continue to increase in demand, as the older adult population of 65 and older is projected to reach approximately 98 million by 2060 (tinyurl.com/5e5jc28r).

Bridging gaps in programming to allow a wide range of ages to connect can be at the heart of the solution to social isolation.

Greatest Generation

The risk of social isolation and loneliness persists, as the National Institute on Aging warns that humans tend to spend more time alone as they age (tinyurl.com/b5r7vbwd). Undoubtedly, recreation professionals are working hard to combat the risks associated with social isolation. How does one recognize social isolation and loneliness in people, especially older adults, and what is the antidote? Bridging gaps in programming to allow a wide range of ages to come together and connect can be at the heart of the solution.

Defining the Issue

What exactly is social isolation? The U.S. Surgeon General's 2023 Advisory (tinyurl.com/bde9u7ne) defines social isolation as "objectively having few social relationships, social roles, group memberships, and infrequent social interaction." This reality could be based not only on one's preferences, but also on outside factors limiting one's ability to experience social connection frequently. Living alone in a one-person household is an example of social isolation that typically occurs in older adults.

The Administration on Community Living's *Profile of Older Americans: 2017* (tinyurl.com/5e5jc28r) highlighted that 20 percent of men and 34 percent of women 65 and older were living alone, with a small percentage of 3.1 percent living in institutional settings. The proportions of living alone amplify as age increases to 75 years old — for example, almost 45 percent of women 75 and older live alone. The loss of one's spouse or partner tends to be a factor as the proportion of older adults living with a partner decreases with age. Factors such as living alone, loss of family or friends, or chronic health issues can contribute to one's level of social isolation by decreasing one's ability to socialize and make connections.

It would be remiss to discuss social isolation without mentioning the impact of loneliness. Loneliness is "a subjective distressing experience that results from perceived isolation or inadequate meaningful connections, where inadequate refers to the discrepancy or unmet need between an individual's preferred and actual experience." While in a state of loneliness, one experiences a feeling of pain — or "social pain" as the World Health Organization's (WHO) definition mentions (tinyurl.com/3bfp6dve). Loneliness is not about being alone, but instead longing for a social connection that is not experienced. Can one experience loneliness without social isolation? Yes, and vice versa. While one can live alone and not experience loneliness, another can be surrounded by people and not meet their social needs, thus feeling the pain of loneliness. However, the combination of social isolation and loneliness is widespread, painful and harmful for mental and physical health.

Health Detriments

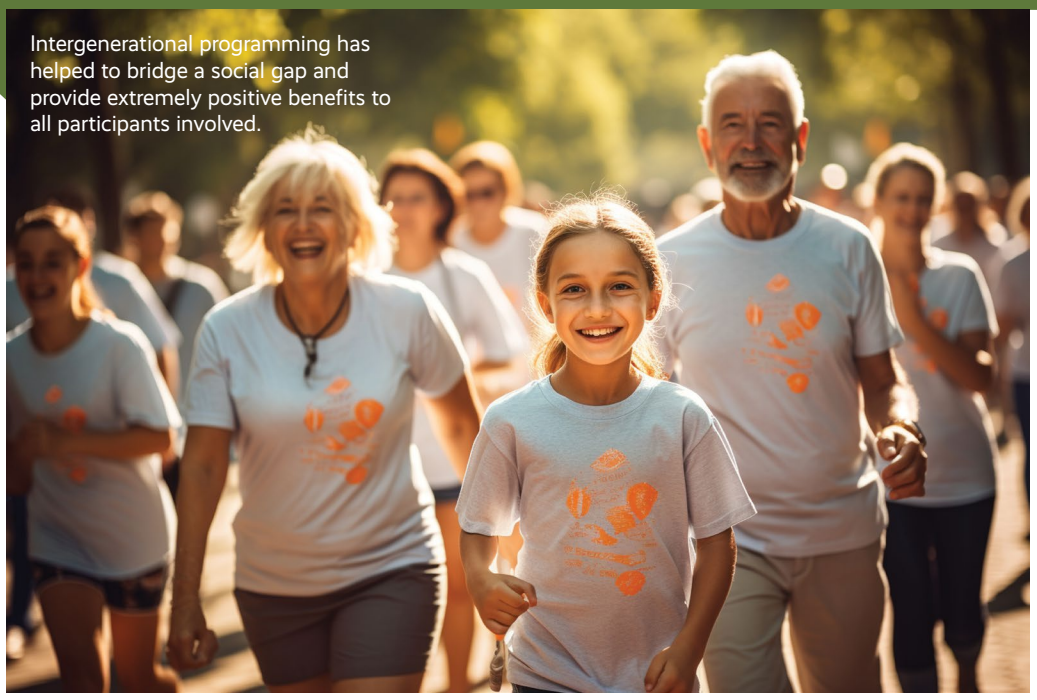
Research reflects how harmful social isolation and loneliness can be to various age ranges, specifically older adults. Some of the most negative impacts on this population include an increase in disease, rapid decline in mental health, loss of purpose and disconnection from the very things that enhance joy. In his 2023 Advisory, "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation" (tinyurl.com/bde9u7ne), the U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek H. Murthy mentions the mortality impact of being socially disconnected is similar to that caused by smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day and even more significant than that associated with obesity and physical inactivity. Murthy goes on to note that the harmful consequences of a society lacking social connection can be felt in our schools, workplaces and civic organizations, where performance, productivity and engagement are diminished.

In addition, the CDC mentions that social isolation in older adults increases the risk of dementia by 50 percent, heart disease by 29 percent and the chance of stroke by 32 percent (tinyurl.com/nxekryv3). These negative health outcomes prompted the launch of the WHO Commission on Social Connection (tinyurl.com/2sf94fsr) in 2023. "High rates of social isolation and loneliness around the world have serious consequences for health and well-being. People without enough strong social connections are at higher risk of stroke, anxiety, dementia, depression, suicide and more," according to WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus (tinyurl.com/5bmr2d7a). The commission's focus for 2024 to 2026 will be addressing loneliness as a pressing health threat, promoting social connection as a priority and accelerating the scaling up of solutions in countries of all incomes. It is not too late to start the necessary steps to alleviate social isolation and loneliness.

Intergenerational Connection

Following the pandemic, older adult recreation centers are seeing a greater increase in participation in social activities, physical activity and more involvement in educational and cultural activities. Some centers are seeing levels of participation that reflect

pre-pandemic levels. One caveat to note is that intergenerational programming has helped to bridge a social gap and provide extremely positive benefits to all participants involved. From tutoring students in schools to assisting with job readiness, creating cultural awareness and connection, and, most importantly, finding common ground in personal experiences, intergenerational programs are making headway in communities across the United States.


Intergenerational programming has helped to bridge a social gap and provide extremely positive benefits to all participants involved.

Why is this intergenerational connection important? It allows older adults to impart wisdom in a way that is meaningful and appropriate to a younger generation. It helps to dispel stereotypes pertaining to ageism — for both the younger and older person — to find relatable similarities and learn from one another in ways that offer a whole new perspective. Creating connections can offer a newfound sense of purpose, and a drive to assist one another, potentially one of the most primal forms of connection.

Rachel Cohen is the executive director of Aging Dynamics and LinkAGES, two agencies that promote thriving, resilient communities through connection. LinkAGES facilitates intergenerational connections in the Denver area by designing, sustaining and supporting high-quality programs to connect generations, decrease ageism and support healthier communities.

Cohen mentions the importance of having intentionality in intergenerational programming, meaning that the basic idea centers around bringing people together through a shared interest. Topics can include art, wellness, movement, nutrition or music. Once this shared interest is identified, the facilitator builds a program around this core theme or interest. Intergenerational programming requires more than just a room to provide the activity. The program has a facilitator who helps to guide and encourage conversation — and thus, the connection — while the activity is happening. This gentle but guided facilitation allows for the magic of intergenerational programming to blossom. Preschoolers through college-age youth can tap into and share personal experiences, and those of an older generation can share in and relate to those experiences. Cohen notes that the key to these connections is that each person brings in some type of relatable experience no matter the age. The vehicle is the program activity, which creates space for the facilitator to pose a question that might foster relatability, and the end goal is connection and understanding one another.

LinkAGES has created toolkits to help foster connection through art and music and by offering additional outreach support to assist under-resourced populations in the community. LinkAGES addresses accessibility and inclusion for spaces and programs. In addition, they offer webinars on age-friendly communities — featuring all different types of programs and efforts in community that can bring generations together.

When asked why creating spaces to enhance connection is so valuable in 2024, Cohen responds by stating, "[S]ensing a disconnect and lack of safe discourse around challenging things happening locally and globally, we have lost that confidence and ability to create a safe speaking environment for each other. We are also trying to define different generations so strictly. Ageism exists and separates communities; we need to come together."

Cohen goes on to note how positive differences can be made in the communities and neighborhoods where we live. She mentions the places we go can be a great way to start making connections. "Start noticing one another — pick your head up, put [your] phone away and pay attention. Chat and acknowl-

edge each other. Take note in natural gathering places like schools and community centers — invite folks to be involved and included, drop a flyer off, take steps to connect with those folks in the neighborhood that may be at a greater need for inclusion, and welcome them."

Taking those first steps by making connections in the community can be important. "Don't let the barriers stop you. Just be open, be curious, think of how to do things differently, build on things that already exist. Simple curiosity is the first step — create an opportunity for openness. It starts building from there."

Small Steps Toward Large Impact

Park and recreation professionals can pioneer intergenerational programming by creating a bridge to allow connection in new ways that enhance physical and mental health outcomes. As Cohen mentions, take that next step to broaden the barriers and age limitations set on most programming — remnants of our "strict" generational definition. Two older adult recreation centers are continuing to work toward doing just that.

The Ontario Senior Center in Ontario, California, has been a space for intergenerational connection in various ways. One way is through staffing. Most staff running the center are 20 to 30 years younger than the 50 and older population they serve. This age gap gives older adults a daily experience of interacting with younger generations as soon as they walk through the center's doors. The community takes pride in coming to the center to enjoy the staff's creative programming, different perspectives and their ability to be a resource, which keeps them connected to the world around them. This interaction promotes the breakdown of ageist biases for staff and participants and is reflected in the center's programmatic offerings, such as the Active Seniors on the Go program. In this program, instructors use positivity to motivate older adult participants to be mobile, active and social in supporting their health and wellness. The program has challenged preconceived notions both staff and participants had about older adults' abilities and interests.

In small steps toward intergenerational programming, the Ontario Senior Center has weekly bingo games open to community members ages 21 and older, along with special activities that are open to all ages, such as excursions. These opportunities allow older adults to bring friends or family of various ages, which encourages all to enjoy and learn together. To see generations within one family interact with each other and all the other attendees around them enriches the experiences by simply sharing them.

The Malley Recreation Center in Englewood, Colorado, caters to healthy aging programs for the 50 and older population. For the past 10 years, the Malley Center has been connecting older adults with local fifth graders through a pen pal letter program from September through April each school year. The goal of this program is to assist students in strengthening their writing skills while receiving support from an older adult volunteer in the community. Shelly Fritz-Pelle, recreation supervisor, mentions that their grandparents are raising some of these students, and others may not have any contact with older adults. At the end of the year, all gather for a pizza party to meet their pen pal in person and celebrate a year of connecting through written correspondence. "Some of these friendships that have formed continue to be maintained many years later," notes Fritz-Pelle.

In addition, the Retirement Support Group at the Malley Center — now known as the "Stayin' Alive Support Group" — plans to pilot a mentoring program with the local schools. This program will assist students in developing skills to master key concepts. By bringing these generations together, social bonds are created, and stereotypes regarding aging fall away.

Cohen mentions being drawn to intergenerational connection because she had a personal experience with a family member who suffered from social isolation and loneliness. "If we see the people around us and we know how to connect, we are going to make more of an effort to be sure those people do not get lost."

Intergenerational connections will heal the world. What better place to spark this healing than in our community centers, recreation centers, schools, workplaces, neighborhoods and homes?

SEE ALSO: *Parks and Recreation: The Secret to a Long, Healthy Life?, Allison Colman,* Parks & Recreation*, May 2019, Vol. 54, Iss. 5, tinyurl.com/msujuh2k.*

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