

IND seniors PAL around with Oak Crest residents

Caitlin Melvin thought she was in for a simple day of basketball with senior citizens.

A year ago, the Institute of Notre Dame student was chosen from her junior religion class to participate in Oak Crest Retirement Center's March Madness, where she was partnered with a resident for a day of games.

Afterward, she sat down for lunch with many of her new Oak Crest friends. She wanted to find a permanent way to link her Baltimore school with the residents.

"On the bus ride home, I started talking about starting a technology class to teach them some things," said Caitlin, a parishioner of St. Luke in Edgemere. "I told my religion teacher I would set it up and so I did."

The Institute of Notre Dame PAL program was born. Short for Preserving and Learning, the club is in its infancy at IND, but it is already making an impact.

The purpose is simple: have students and Oak Crest residents get together on a frequent basis to share skills relevant to each generation. The real goal is to build mutual respect for one another's gifts.

"It's supposed to be more of a social thing, but I think the learning aspect is good," Caitlin said.

Caitlin enlisted fellow senior Kirby Gaddy, a parishioner of St. Francis Xavier in Baltimore, to be co-president of the group. Kirby, who also attended the March Madness event, said she was amazed by the vitality of the people she met.

The first interaction came in November when 10 Oak Crest residents visited IND and watched as students taught them how to use basic and complicated computer programs. Some of the visitors were IND graduates.

As they walked the hallways they once roamed decades ago, memories flooded back for the Oak Crest residents.

“They were saying, ‘This used to be this and this used to be that.’ They saw how IND has changed over the years,” Kirby said.

Although the students had much to teach their visitors, many Oak Crest residents have their own computers or work on them regularly.

“Some were like, ‘We got this,’ and then others needed help adding attachments (to e-mail) or downloading something,” Kirby said. “It was amazing looking at them and saying, ‘Wow, you know how to do that?’ “

Alison Krull, Oak Crest’s volunteer coordinator, said she hopes to start more inter-generational groups at the complex.

“The residents are really impressed with the skills of the students,” Ms. Krull said. “They’re happy the students want to work with them. This really means a lot to them.”

Oak Crest will soon get a chance to return the education favor.

Members of the club will visit Oak Crest during the first week of February, where residents have promised to teach the students the lost art of knitting and crocheting.

“I’m so excited,” Kirby said with a laugh. “I can’t wait to go.”

With graduation looming, Kirby and Caitlin are searching for their replacements and a future for PAL.

“We want it to keep going,” Caitlin said.