



Natasha and her pal Jim

Courtesy Sages and Seekers

Teens and the Elderly Are the Two Loneliest Demographics. A Local Nonprofit Is Bringing Them Together

Sages and Seekers pairs older folks with high school students to combat loneliness—and, during the pandemic, their work has been more important than ever

By **Andrew Dubbins** - October 27, 2020

Stay-at-home orders and social distancing may be exacerbating America's loneliness epidemic— with mental health experts warning of increasing anxiety, hopelessness, and thoughts of suicide —but the pandemic by no means created the problem. A 2018 study reported almost [half of Americans](#) were feeling alone. Another [study in 2015](#) found that prolonged isolation can be as damaging to your health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. [Older adults](#), who can often feel left out and forgotten, are especially hard hit. And teenagers, who tend to spend time on their phones rather than interacting with friends face to face, have been shown to be susceptible to [feelings of isolation](#).

Enter [Sages and Seekers](#), a Los Angeles non-profit seeking to combat social isolation by matching these two loneliest demographics. High school teenagers are paired with elderly mentors and engage in regular conversations (now held via Zoom). The program, which can last either four or eight weeks, is being utilized by high schools and senior centers nationwide.



Jesse and Bea

COURTESY SAGES AND SEEKERS

Founder Elly Katz, who left her career in graphic design to launch the passion project in 2008, says the program benefits both the seniors (called sages), and the teens (called seekers). Older adults get to enjoy the company of a thoughtful and interested teenager, while the teenagers benefit from the wisdom and experience of their elderly partner. “They’re talking about meaningful things,” says Katz, “like how is social media affecting your life? And what do you think about the riots? What do you think about Black Lives Matter? What do you think about what’s going on politically?”

The program also targets age-related segregation, says Katz. “In that first coming together, not just the age stereotype drops, but everyone sees everyone as just human,” Katz says. In one success story, 17-year-old Ted was getting one rejection letter after another from colleges. He asked his 86-year-old sage, Peter, how he dealt with disappointment. Peter emphasized the importance of resilience, recounting how he was drafted to the Dodgers at 19, until a shoulder injury derailed his dream.

Seekers are most often sophomores and juniors in high school—old enough to apply their mentors’ wisdom to their own lives, says Katz. Sages range from their 60s to 90s. One, a 97-year-old named Helen, insisted on driving from Santa Monica to Larchmont Charter School to visit her mentee.

Katz told her, “Helen, I’m not really sure you should be driving.” “I’ve been driving these streets since I was 16,” salty Helen replied.

Switching to Zoom in the wake of COVID-19 was initially a challenge, says Katz, because “a lot of [seniors] don’t know the difference between an ethernet and WiFi connection.” But overall the program is thriving during the quarantine, says Katz, with many students signing up over and over.

Some sages and seekers remain friends long after their program. Bea, an 84-year-old artist, used to draw 21-year-old Jesse during their conversations, and they formed a close bond. When Bea passed away, Jesse gave a speech at her funeral. “He really captured who this woman was and what she had exposed him to in his life going forward,” Katz recalls.

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