

RIVERS

THE RIVERS SCHOOL
333 Winter Street
Weston, Massachusetts 02493-1040
Tel: 781-235-9300
Fax: 781-239-3614
www.rivers.org



June 13, 2012

To Whom It May Concern:

Imagine a program that gets teenagers to step outside of their comfort zones, that requires them to sit and talk to total strangers one-on-one, that exposes them to the wisdom of senior citizens who've lived much longer than they have, that helps them to reflect on their own relationships and choices. A program that helps them develop their listening, speaking, and writing skills, that gives them time, away from the busyness of their everyday lives, to have a conversation. And a program that helps these students learn vital things about themselves and about life. The Sages & Seekers Program is all that and more, as I have discovered these past three years in my position as English teacher at The Rivers School. Having witnessed firsthand the connections my students made through this program and the ways in which, to quote several of them, "it changed [their lives]," I cannot say enough positive things about Sages & Seekers.

One of my colleagues had his students participate in the program the first two years that our school was involved. When his teaching assignment changed, I gladly stepped in to take advantage of the opportunity of having my two sophomore classes take part in the eight-week program. Initially, I'd thought the program would be a wonderful way to expose students to the stories and wisdom of older people. The program fit with the essential question for our sophomores: how do my choices affect me and my relationships with others? I thought, what better way for the kids to think about this question than through hearing about the choices senior citizens have made and the effect that their choices had? Similarly, it's always frustrated me that schools are supposed to be preparing students for life and, I'd argue, to engage with society in a civil and meaningful way. And yet ironically, while students are being educated, they are typically removed from many parts of society. Sages & Seekers provides them the opportunity of learning from and learning with people in a completely different stage of life and with considerable life experience.

While the program absolutely accomplished these goals that I had, I was amazed by all of the other things it accomplished. For students who are uncomfortable with speaking, the program forced them to do so in a low-stakes situation. I saw shy students gain a sense of empowerment, realizing that they could maintain a conversation with a total stranger for seventy minutes straight. Many of my students confessed how nervous they had been initially, but they later said they were amazed at how quickly the time that they spent with their Sages went by. Additionally, my students' essays, where the students were required to capture one of the lessons they'd garnered from their Sages, stood out as their most powerful

writing of the year, primarily because they were emotionally invested in what they were writing and knew that they would have to read these stories in front of the entire group of Sages & Seekers. Many students slaved tirelessly over multiple drafts, saying, "I want my essay to be perfect." Others said they didn't think they could do justice to their Sages' amazing lives and wisdom.

And yet they did do them justice. We heard moving stories of people who have survived bullying, alcoholism, divorce, discrimination, and the Holocaust, to name a few. The one element these stories had in common, however, was that they all illustrated life lessons of some sort. Throughout the year, I tease my students that the question I write on their essays, more often than any other comment, is "So what?" I didn't have to write that on any of these essays. It was clear that these stories mattered to the student authors, and the student authors made them matter to us.

At the program's end, my students were saddened. They couldn't believe how quickly the eight weekly meetings went by. They say they now view old people differently. Many students professed a desire to get to know their own grandparents better, since the program made them realize how little they know about them. As testament to the power of the program, many students plan to keep in touch with their Sages. And almost all say this is the part of sophomore year that they will never forget.

Although I know that I'll continue doing the program with next year's sophomores, I can't help but wishing that all students could have this experience. Elly Katz, the program's founder, wants to expand Sages & Seekers. Ideally, she'd be able to put it in every school. While putting the program in every school may be a stretch, I certainly hope you'll support her in her efforts. There are students and senior citizens out there who will benefit in ways that you can't begin to imagine.

Thanks for your time and attention. If I may answer any questions about the program or speak any further on its behalf, please let me know.

Sincerely,



Mary Mertsch
English Teacher
m.mertsch@rivers.org