

# RIVERS

## Sages & Seekers Builds Bridges Between Generations

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### How do you measure a life?

Rivers 10th graders tackle the topic each year as they participate in the Sages & Seekers program. The students are paired with older adults from surrounding communities; as “Seekers,” they spend hours interviewing the “Sages,” delving deep into their life journeys to create the program’s culminating project—a tribute essay that students present to their peers and the other sages at the end of the term. The tribute is not a mere retelling of incidents or a timeline, but a fully developed story with themes, lessons learned, and motifs teased out of the ordinary dramas of a lifetime.

This spring marked the 10th year of Rivers’s participation in Sages & Seekers. The nonprofit organization works with schools and other institutions to build bridges between students and older people. Rivers was one of the early adopters of the program, becoming involved when founder Elly Katz reached out to area schools, says English department chair Mac Caplan. It began as an after-school community-service initiative but gradually evolved into a cornerstone of the 10th grade program. Caplan says Rivers is the only participating school that makes Sages & Seekers a required component of the curriculum.

It was a natural fit for Rivers. “Three or four years ago,” explains Caplan, “we were in the process of revamping the sophomore English curriculum. It had been genre based, with no thematic coherence. As we thought about how to create coherence, we settled on empathy—building our own, and analyzing it within texts.” Sages & Seekers, whose motto is “Developing Empathy Through the Power of Conversation,” supports that theme on multiple levels.



Bringing the program to Rivers is a complicated feat of logistics. In the fall, the process of finding Sages begins. The goal is to have one Sage per Seeker, and Caplan says it’s a “herculean task” to track down 90-plus seniors who are willing and able to make the commitment and travel to campus each week.

Once the program begins, the initial meetings are spent in introducing the Sages and Seekers. At some point, there is a “speed dating” session, so that students can get to know the Sages a bit and express their preferences in choosing a partner; good chemistry between Sage and Seeker can make

all the difference. Then the process begins in earnest, as students spend several class sessions interviewing their Sages and digging beyond the surface to find a storyline.

Along with the curricular component, the program also includes community engagement. On a Monday in late April, the 10th grade gathered in Hutton Hall with a cohort of Sages to share lunch. Afterward, the students led three workshops: an improv session, an art project, and a math and technology discussion. Finally, both Sages and Seekers gathered in Benson Gymnasium to participate in a meal-packaging program run by End Hunger New England. Donning hairnets and

plastic gloves, participants measured, bagged, and boxed 18,000 nutritious meals that will go to feed the hungry throughout the region.

Just a couple of weeks later, students and Sages convened again to share their tribute essays. Since the entire grade participates, the process takes place over several days, meeting class by class. As each Seeker in turn stood at the podium to share their tribute, the Sage took a seat nearby, listening and, in some cases, responding with visible emotion to their stories. Portraits emerged of individuals with long, eventful lives, full of meaningful experiences both commonplace and extraordinary. There was no sugar-coating or shying away from difficult topics: divorce, disappointment, illness, racism, professional struggles. But there was also much to celebrate: humor, happy marriages, children raised, dreams fulfilled, wisdom earned. The Sages had lessons to impart, and the Seekers had eagerly taken in those lessons. A few elders presented gifts to the students—including, in one case, a framed poem that may have summed up the eternal message of old age to youth: “Hold on to your dreams / They all may come true / Believe in yourself / And others will, too.”