A daughter’s love is changing lives

Colleen Romito’s initiative to bridge the gap has blossomed into four intergenerational programs

Christine Shaw Special to Zanesville Times Recorder
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ZANESVILLE Colleen Romito’s mother, Jackie O’Donnell, passed away in May 2017, just weeks before Mother’s Day.

Prior to her death, Colleen traveled to Cleveland to visit with her mother who suffered with dementia. The transition Colleen watched transpire over the previous decade was heartbreaking. Her mother had moved to nine senior care facilities in the 11 years since her diagnosis in hopes of finding the right fit for her.

“On my three-hour trip, I often wondered what God was teaching me through the pain, guilt and sadness,” Colleen shared. “I knew we could not care for Mom at home, but I believed she and the other residents deserved joy and meaning in their lives. I often cried on the way home wishing I could take her with me.”

In the fall of 2016, ‘Mom OD’, as Colleen’s mom was affectionately referred, resided at Arbor at Stow, a memory care nursing home. It was there Colleen had what she calls an “aha” moment that would turn her career in Early Childhood Education into a passion and legacy for her mother.

On one of her visits, children from a local preschool visited the residents for Halloween. “The whole vibe of the unit changed,” Colleen shared. “I saw the elders smile, sit up taller, and, for a moment, there were sparks in their eyes.” She also saw fear in some of the children’s eyes. “They were unfamiliar with the aging process, wheelchairs, and behaviors.”

As Colleen started the three-hour trek back to Zanesville that October evening, she thought about how her background could be combined with senior care to make

See LOVE, Page 2A

Colleen Romito (center), founder of Timeless Wings, an intergenerational programming project, looks on with emotion as Primrose resident and Grandfriend, Dolly Goers, and The Little Barnyard student, Bentley, discuss how much their grass grew since their last session. The students and their grandfriens read the book “It’s Haircut Time: How one little boy overcame his fear of haircut day” by Michele Griffin, OT. The lessons go beyond reading to science and math as the students review different types of soil and measured how much the grass grew.

CHRISTINE SHAW/FOR THE TIMES RECORDER
Love

Continued from Page 1A

a difference in the life of seniors, like her mother. At this point, I decided to dedicate myself to bringing youthful energy and joy to seniors," Colleen shared.

And while her dedication has since helped more people than she ever could’ve imagined, the journey came with many challenges.

From vision to reality

An early childhood professional for the last three decades, Colleen taught early childhood education at Ohio University, has consulted for the Ohio Department of Education, and has served as a program administrator in Childcare Licensing with Muskingum County Human Services. She’s also in her early career when she needed to learn more about senior care to make her dream of intergenerational programming a reality.

Through her research, Colleen discovered that connecting the generations through meaningful experiences has been taking place for more than 40 years. Not just inviting children to sing or visit during the holidays, but planning intentional experiences, Colleen explained. “The research cites the benefits for seniors and for children of all ages.”

Colleen took online courses and spent hours reviewing research to gain an understanding of intergenerational programming. “I discovered many similarities between my training and experience and that of professionals working in senior care,” she said. “It’s all about learning and relationships across the lifespan.”

Most intergenerational programs are created through a framework and lens of gerontology, and Colleen felt that a specific expertise in head development could have an influence on the conversation of intergenerational care. She became a member of Generation Bridges Together, two national organizations committed to change the way aging is viewed.

“Colleen is so passionate, knowledgeable and has experience,” said Andrea Fonte Weaver, founder and executive director of Bridges Together. “We need more Colleens in the world who understand the need to be intentional in creating circles of love for seniors and children.”

And she said intergenerational programming doesn’t happen naturally in today’s world. “It’s often the impact of a relative who inspires us to create these circles of love for others,” she said.

As Colleen began to network with intergenerational professionals like Andrea, she visited intergenerational programs to learn how such programming might work in Zanesville. She recalled pondering how she could meet with senior care leaders and put on a workshop’s hat and not the hat of a daughter who felt she had not done all she could for her mother’s end of life experience. She wondered if those in senior care would be interested in her expertise.

She participated in webinars to learn about grant funding for intergenerational programs and researched the pros and cons of starting a nonprofit organization. “My long-term goal is to create a shared space where a community would welcome a child care center within their building because the research suggests this is the ideal environment.”

She learned about the challenges of transportation and other logistics that need to be overcome. Through the challenges Colleen continues to find new energy through being surrounded by those who are establishing to make her vision of intergenerational programming in our community a reality. She is thankful for the strong team of advocates who offer support, insights and ideas for funding like Andrea and Dr. Shan non Jarrott from The Ohio State University, a key researcher in intergenerational programming.

Locally Colleen met with Sandy Miller, director of the North Terrace Christian Preschool, to discuss the possibilities of partnering with Brookdale Senior Living. “It was very interesting in the idea of having the children participate in meaningful activities with grandchildren,” Colleen explained. While intergenerational activities can seem overwhelming to busy senior care administrators, the relationships she has built have ensured that they are working toward the goal of bringing joyful, youthful energy to enhance the lives of all involved.

The groundwork laid, Colleen reflected on the name for her vision. She recalled wanting something meaningful that captures the importance of connecting the generations. “To me the butterfly represents the natural cycle of life. Each stage in life offers something new. Without change, there would be no beauty, no transformation,” she reflected. “The image of a butterfly in flight reminds me of our ability to always soar and fly to greater heights. How we fly is not determined by our age, it’s determined.” Hence the name Timeless Wings emerged.

One turns into four

The first Timeless Wings session was held at Brookdale Senior Living in January 2018. “On the first day of our Timeless Wings session, I felt so many emotions—joy, excitement, and nervousness,” Colleen recalled. “We sang songs about our names made famous by others, it was amazing and I felt the magic that I had envisioned.”

Fast forward to this month where Colleen has built relationships for a total of four Timeless Wings programs in Zanesville so far. In addition to the partnership that began in January 2018 with North Terrace Church of Christ Preschool and Brookdale Senior Living, there are programs at Head Start and the Alfred Carr Center, Head Start and Zane Trace Villages, and the newest partnership that just began in April, The Little Barnyard Learning Center and Primrose Retirement Community.

“All participants would love to have more sessions a week,” Colleen shared enthusiastically. “Activity coordinators and grandfriends tell me it’s the highlight of their week.”

“Timeless Wings’ ses

sco the mission of providing options for both to learn new skills.”

Echoing Cindy’s sentiment, Primrose resident Judy Geers stated, “I loved the little ones. We love teaching them.”

In March Colleen was awarded a $5,000 grant from Bridges Together, a non-profit organization in Massachusetts that works to bridge the generations. The grant includes implementation of a six-hour training and piloting of an intergenerational curriculum. Colleen’s was just one of four grants across the nation. The pilot lessons are being implemented at Brookdale Senior Living and Zane Trace Villages. North Terrace Church of Christ Preschool student, Grady, said, “It was the best day ever! I made a new friend and shared a lot with him.” Colleen has a proven track record of intergenerational programming and a clear desire to learn more, Andrea said of the award to Colleen’s project. “And, she has a committed team.”

Current partners were included in the richochet and a renewed interest in others.

“Intergenerational programs are a vaccination against ageism and a prescription for longevity. Andrea explained. “There’s a richness and beauty to being interdependent and Colleen is being a change agent in that effort.”

Bridges Together offers six-week curricular programs for older children that can be adapted to schools or as after school programs as well. Those interested in learning about or supporting intergenerational programming in the community are encouraged to contact Colleen at cornet43@gmail.com.

When Colleen sees the energy and excitement during the sessions, she smiles pride knowing the legacy she intended for Mom OD is being realized. We’re so grateful for the opportunity to work with such dedicated individuals and to be a part of this amazing project.”

“Thank you,” she said, “I am forever grateful for my ‘aha’ moment when I watched the children learn with my mom. That moment, forever etched in Colleen’s memory, has led her on the greatest journey of her career. "Learning truly is timeless." She added with a smile.