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Zoom pals give older adults a pick-me-up

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Nancy Rucker, a retired teacher, was paired with a college student for a unique pen pal program. Rucker enjoys getting to know her new friend via Zoom. Photo courtesy of Waltonwood Cotswold

CHARLOTTE – Nancy Rucker enjoys getting to know new people. So when associates at Waltonwood Cotswold approached her about participating in a unique new pen pal program, Rucker was willing to give it a try.

The senior living community is partnering with Wayne State University for a modernized version of pen pals. Instead of writing to each other, college students and older adults connect via Zoom.

Associates help residents log onto the platform for their weekly or bi-weekly calls with their pals in Michigan. They talk about everything from the weather to schoolwork.

“I didn’t expect to form a deep connection with my pen pal Victoria that fast, but I am glad I did,” Rucker said. “I have enjoyed getting to know her and what she hopes to accomplish in life. She is very focused and hopes to be a doctor one day. As a retired schoolteacher, it is inspiring to hear someone so young already have her life planned out.”

Waltonwood Cotswold resident Georgene Sherer is still getting to know her pen pal, Ruby. Sherer enjoys their conversations every other week. She prefers seeing Ruby face-to-face instead of waiting for a letter to arrive.

“This is my first time having a pen pal,” Sherer said. “I’ve always loved learning something new about people, so I hope Ruby and I learn a lot from each other and stay connected moving forward.”

Donna MacDonald, director of outreach for the Institute of Gerontology at Wayne State, said students participating in the program are enrolled in higher-level Aging and the Life Course. She’d like to see the program built into the curriculum.

“Anytime that we can create an intergenerational opportunity for our student population to connect with older adults is a win-win for both sides,” MacDonald said.

The program not only allows students to learn more about seniors, but it also helps seniors socialize, which can positively affect their physical and mental health.

“The seniors find joy through the pen pal program,” said Logan Diard, life enrichment manager at Waltonwood Cotswold. “The Zoom calls have become a favorite activity, and it warms our hearts to see the positive interactions between the seniors and students. We are always looking for unique and entertaining ways to keep residents engaged.”

The program lasts one semester, but the community hopes to extend the partnership into the future. Residents who participate say they’ve formed deep relationships with their pals.

Rucker describes the program as a “mid-week pick-me-up.”

"I know this is only for one semester, but Victoria and I will stay in touch," Rucker said. "I already plan to add he to my Christmas card list."

"My motivation for this project stemmed from the increasing social isolation that all Americans, but particularly older adults, have been experiencing during this pandemic. I wanted to utilize technological advances to combat social isolation and foster connections across generations and geography. I also wanted to provide students with the opportunity to learn from older adults and understand how a person's life history shapes the trajectory of their life course. In developing this project, I have worked with Lindsay Charlefour, Director of Life Enrichment at Waltonwood Communities, to establish pen pal correspondence between Wayne State students and Waltonwood residents. We have been delighted to hear how well the project has been going since we launched it in September."

— Patricia Morton, Ph.D. assistant professor at Wayne State University

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