

Elder abuse

Essential question: “What’s at stake when an elderly person is abused and what can we do about it?”

School: Grover Washington Jr. Middle School, Philadelphia, PA

Year of the project: 2003-2004

Students in Karen Garrow’s 8th grade class narrowed the focus of their inquiry from the broad category of “abuse” to “elder abuse,” motivated in part by the story they read from CBS News about a woman who died from wounds sustained in a California nursing home. Their project ultimately followed two related tracks – partnering with seniors at a nearby nursing home and, with guidance from a U.S. District Attorney, advocating for the first national legislation ever to comprehensively address elder abuse.

They began by researching issues surrounding aging and elder abuse. Working in groups, they created a list of questions about one subtopic, such as the lifestyle changes aging brings, and used books and internet sources to find answers.

The Assistant Director of Therapeutic Recreation from a local nursing home facilitated two sensitivity training sessions for the class. She led activities designed to give the students a feeling of what life is like for some older residents. She asked students to draw portraits of themselves as seniors, and in order to demonstrate what having arthritis is like, students tried to write with their fingers bound in rubber bands. To demonstrate a senior's poor eyesight, students in the class tried to read small print through glasses coated with petroleum jelly. The activities, research and training prepared the students to work with facility’s residents.

The students took a field trip to meet the residents of the nursing home and tour the facility, and a few weeks later, hosted a visit to the school by seven elderly residents. The students took them on a tour of the building, then engaged them in activities in the classroom including games and a tour of the internet.

David Hoffman, Assistant U.S. District Attorney, came to the class early in the project to talk to the kids about his experiences prosecuting cases of elder abuse in the Philadelphia region. Mr. Hoffman was responsible for improving the living conditions for over 4,000 elderly people in Southeastern Pennsylvania, and had set a new national standard for bringing suits of elder abuse against nursing homes.

Inspired by Mr. Hoffman's success in improving elder health care, the students learned about the "Elder Justice Act," a bill awaiting congressional approval. They collected signatures on a petition asking Congressman Chaka Fattah to support the bill, which was being co-sponsored in the Senate by Senators Santorum and Specter. Representatives from Philadelphia Corporation for Aging and The National Center on Elder Abuse advised the students on how to lobby for support of the bill in the most effective manner.

In May, the students traveled to Washington DC and met with Congressman Fattah's chief of staff. She was impressed by the impassioned presentation Ms. Garrow's students made, and assured the class that their concerns would be brought to the attention of Congressman Fattah. The class also met with aides from Senator Arlen Specter's office, to thank him for supporting the bill. The students were then treated to a "behind the scenes" tour of the Capitol, courtesy of Senator Specter.

Later, they were heartened to learn that Congressman Fattah did indeed sign on to the Elder Justice Act as a co-sponsor.

"I feel like the bill entitled Elder Justice Act must become a law to benefit and provide help to elders and the youngsters who'll become elders some day. I will do whatever I can do to help the elders. Now I feel that our project is worth the hard work and the time because we will not only be rescuing a small group of people, we are rescuing everybody."

-- *Li Xia Lu, 8th grade student*