

An age of improvement

An Alternate school in Agassiz brings seniors into the mix. The results include improved student performance and behaviours, budding self-esteem and community responsibility ... and a lot more graduates.

by Sandy Balascak

In June, 2013 the Agassiz Centre for Education (ACE), a small school delivering Alternate and Continuing Education programs, made history. Three women, aged 76, 80 and 89, graduated high school, with the 89-year-old being the oldest graduate in BC history and quite possibly in Canada. These were not honorary diplomas. All three women attended class with the youth, earned their Dogwood Diplomas, and attended their graduation ceremony with the youth and adults who had worked alongside them.

It was an exciting time for ACE. We received coverage nationally and internationally. Certainly the youth in that grad class had more extensive and positive media attention than an Alternate school has ever seen and they were able to be part of a historic graduation class. But every year our community rallies around the ACE grad and everyone, including local press, applauds the accomplishments of both the youth and the adults who overcome so much to earn the Dogwood, but this year was different. We had more school age graduates than we had ever had.

The journey began seven years ago when I walked into a school that had been a Continuing Education Centre, but had recently had the Alternate program moved into their building. The Alternate school, under a different name at the time, had a terrible reputation and some community members had fought to keep them out of town. They did not want “those kids” in their town. I landed in the middle of an unhappy situation. I regretted taking the position and did not think that I would be able to accomplish anything, but the students described themselves as stupid and bad, and I knew

I had to at least change that. I could not walk away. The three Rs for me became rebranding, rebuilding, and reprogramming.

I brought in structure, rules, appropriate courses, and discipline; none of which boosted my popularity. It would be an arduous journey and although I had great support from Ray Steigvilas, the adult teacher who was and is an integral part of our success, I knew we could not do this without outside help. I began by creating community partnerships. I took our students to the public library and let them get to know the staff and become comfortable there. Community Services helped with youth workers and programs and I created a partnership with the Legion, which turned out to be one of my best decisions.

The previous Alternate program had a yearly Christmas dinner for families, but space was an issue and, as we — and our guest list — grew, we turned to the Legion for the use of its hall and commercial kitchen. Christmas evolved into Grinchmas, because Christmas is not always a happy time for our kids. We were now able to host dinner for 60 people. Donations are enough to cover the food expense, but the donation of space is the reason it continues.

The first two graduations after my arrival were small, informal ceremonies at lunch. There were no youth graduating from the Alternate program; only adults who had come back to finish their secondary education. I knew it would be important to have a better graduation both for the adults, but more importantly to give the students a goal. With the Legion as a partner for the use of the hall, I found a support for cap and gown supplies, and a volunteer caterer. Our first formal grad was 2009. I had changed the name, cre-

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ated a new logo and motto with input from the students, and let them choose the school colors (black and purple), so we were able to have the use them at graduation to increase the pride in the school. Those who were too young to graduate saw the excitement generated from the ceremony and banquet.

At the first graduation Frank Rolye, the grandfather of a graduate, approached me about the possibility of working with seniors in the fall. He told me that many of the seniors were afraid of “those kids” and did not have a positive view of them. He could see what we were accomplishing now and he wanted to get the two groups together to change that. We created a Senior/Teen event where they would have lunch together at the Legion Hall. My students would serve the seniors, then they would spend the afternoon in an activity; ultimately it ended up always being bingo because everyone liked that the best. My students were initially not thrilled with the idea, but they did like the idea of getting out of school for the afternoon, so they were willing to go. It was not long before they were building friendships with the seniors and I would get feedback about my kids

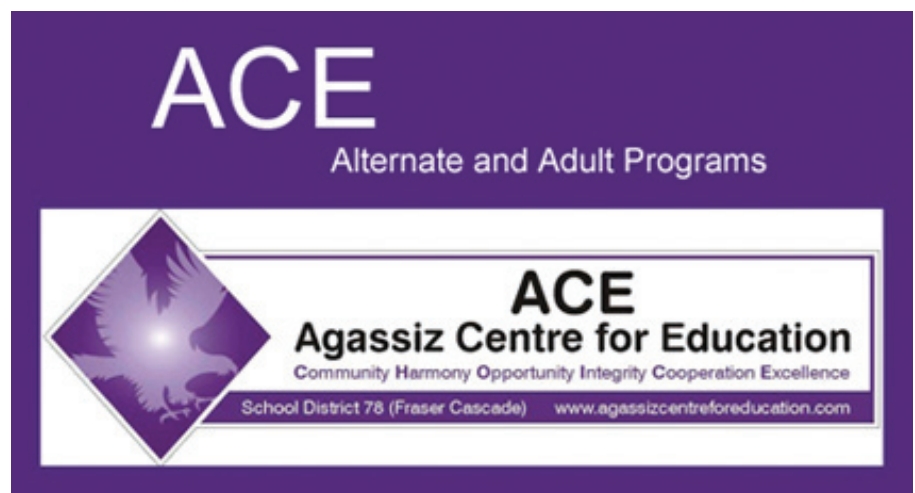
opening doors for them and helping them with packages. “Those kids” now had names and the two groups liked each other. Chris Wejr, the principal of Kent Elementary at the time, saw the value of the program so his school became a partner and we now have elementary students involved as well.

The Senior/Teen events were a driving force for a Christmas morning brunch for seniors who would otherwise be alone. I ran it by my students and there was instant buy-in. Students gathered donations for the food and the gifts and the Legion members were happy to support us with a hall and someone to dress up as Santa. All of the students were involved with the organization and

some were able to be there Christmas morning. The Harrison Beach Hotel donated three rooms, and I accompanied the youth who would be there Christmas morning to the hotel for an overnight stay and a Christmas Eve dinner. I watched their excitement at staying in a nice hotel. I had immense pride in what my kids had become and that I could take them to a hotel and have no concerns about behaviour. There was a sense of pride about representing ACE in the community.

The Christmas morning brunch is now three-years-old. It has doubled in size for both volunteers and attendees, and the event and the students are embraced by the community. The donations and number of volunteers have become overwhelming. This past year, Global TV and the *Vancouver Sun* covered the brunch. The students still do the preparation, and this year, two of our grads were Santa and his Elf. The Elf was featured on the front page of the *Sun* and Santa played a big part in the Global coverage.

From the work with seniors came the Christmas morning event and from that event came the Betty Urquhart Award from the University of the Fraser Valley (UFV) for community service. For my kids there was not a deep understanding



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about the significance of the award. However, when I asked to bring 10 of the students to accept the award they became interested. I promoted the event in a press release and used the phrase “When bad kids go good” in the subject line. The sponsor suggested that the tag line be removed, but the kids insisted otherwise. They wanted people to know that they were once thought of as “the bad kids.”

I talked a limo company into subsidizing our transportation and I told the students that I wanted them to wear dress pants and a nice shirt. I arranged for a local thrift store to donate clothes if necessary. The students took that request further and were soon setting their additional rules. Anyone coming in the limo had to be dressed up and in school colors. One of the parents, a hairstylist, donated her service and bought everyone corsages. I found tuxedo vests and ties, in school colors. I ended up with a group that looked like they were going to prom. By the time we arrived at UFV we were on the local press Facebook page and a photographer at UFV was there to greet us. The university treated us like VIPs, and gave them each gifts. I had arranged to have lunch for not only us, but a group of about 20 Agassiz residents, Trustees and our Superintendent, all of whom had made the journey to watch us re-


ceive the award. For three hours my “bad kids” sat through convocation respectfully and without incident.

In the year following the award, I created the High School Seniors program to bring the seniors into the school both for the sake of those who lamented not being able to finish their education in their youth, but more importantly to continue and to strengthen the relationships already established. Ray would be the instructor and I knew he would be successful at spearheading the program. The program was successful for both groups, and led to our historic graduation in which the kids could share. After the graduation, we took a group of previous and present grads to the Ministry of Education. The students were part of a focus group, interviewed for the BC Education Plan blog resulting in post that portrayed the school and the students positively.

Sadly, despite these successes, I still encounter negative reactions to the program. Some people believe that it is a waste of taxpayer money to bring seniors back to high school, and others think that “those kids” have no place in working with seniors.

The quantifiable benefits to our students stemming from our work with seniors have been numerous, and have had a significant impact on their self-esteem and pride in not

only themselves, but their school as well. However, there have been numerous unquantifiable benefits that are equally important. The students see seniors in a different light, strong and long-lasting relationships have been established, and the level of respect for all adults has increased. I see my main function with Alternate youth as guiding them on a path to becoming productive members of society, and this program has been invaluable in achieving that goal.

ACE has gone from the outcast school that people fought to keep out of town, to the “in-cast” school that has been described in the press as part of the community fabric. If you walk into ACE today, it is highly unlikely that you will hear any bad language; they do not swear while they are at, or representing, their school. If you arrive while we are having the lunch we provide for them every day, you will be offered food, someone will give up a chair if all of them are taken, and the students will wait until everyone has had a share before taking seconds. I will be taking them on a trip to the Ministry again this year and have no worries about their conduct there or in the hotel. They are a group of respectable youth who now see value in themselves, and their behavior would rival, if not be better than, any other group their age. There are, of course, many changes we have made in the school and everything has had an impact on the progression of our program and the doubling of our enrollment, and the team of staff have played a major role; however, the work with seniors has been one of the most significant contributing factors. 

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