

Closing the Age Gap

Connecting with seniors, by Ulara Nakagawa

Imagine lending an arm to a helpless old fruit fly crossing the street. I'll have to confess that a certain article I recently came across in the news has brought the absurd image to mind. The article, *Hanging with the Young Doubles Lifespan of Fruit Flies: Study*, informs us of a recent report headed by a professor of biology at the University of Iowa. The findings reveal that a species of mutant fruit fly, genetically bred to be short-lived and physically weak, lived twice as long when raised in an environment with younger, healthier flies.

This got me thinking about my dear grandmother. It was at a family gathering last month that I snuck out of the party room at my uncle's home to grab a private breath of fresh air away from the mixture of boisterous debating and drunken debauchery that my charming and sake-loving kinfolk love to concoct. As I stood alone outside, I eventually heard a slurred voice pipe up from inside, "Where is Ulara?" Nobody seemed to know, until I heard the raspy 82-year-old voice of my grandmother announce: "She's been out in the backyard for about ten minutes."

If anyone could keep track of all 20 or so people and what they might each be doing at any given moment, it is the queen bee (or fruit fly) herself. But I happen to be sure that it is the three equally sharp-witted and lively grandchildren with whom my grandmother shares a home, that keep her on par with them. The study, my grandmother, they both point out the value of interaction with the young for our seniors.

For Deva Hirsch, Founding President and current board member of Hands On Tokyo (HOT), the city's first bilingual volunteer matching organization, that value is all too apparent: "[Senior citizens] want something to look forward to...it's not all about physical needs, it's also mental...maybe if [they] look forward to our visits, we can help extend their lives or make them more full."

Hirsch knows this firsthand, as Hands on Tokyo extends such opportunities for interaction to volunteers and the elderly with their ongoing projects with senior citizens in Tokyo homes. And in keeping with that spirit, HOT will

hold a major annual event this fall in Tokyo called Day of Service on October 4, to be held at four locations across the city, including a seniors' home. Day of Service 2008 follows the success of last year's very successful event that brought over 130 Japanese and foreign nationals of all ages and backgrounds together to volunteer at three different projects throughout the city.

One particular standout moment for those involved with the HOT Day of Service last year was from the seniors' home. Elderly women were given makeovers, then handed Polaroid photos of their 'after' looks. Some of the women were so moved by their remarkable transformations, versions of themselves that they had not seen in so long, that they were unexpectedly brought to tears.

Other activities at this year's event will include hand massaging and nail care, tea tasting, potpourri making, cross-stitching, and more. In addition to the senior's home, there will also be important projects held at other locations, including one at a children's



Everyone deserves a little pampering.

home where a playground will be rebuilt for children who cannot live with their parents.

As my meeting with Hirsch and colleague Yumiko came to an end, I knew that I had been inspired and informed more than sufficiently by the dynamic duo for this piece. Yet, my inner journalist instinct kicked in and I tried still to draw out that one last bit of information, the one significant core statement that

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I could latch onto. I ask, "So what is the true purpose of this kind of event?" and "what is the ultimate reward of volunteering with the elderly?" Hirsch said something in response that made all my last minute digging seem rather silly: "I think that for a lot of people, seeing that you make someone else happy, whoever it is, makes you happy. So it's not so much 'what can I GET from that particular senior', but 'if I can bring joy to their day, then I am happy'."

It's true. It's not about that fuzzy image I once had of volunteering with the elderly, and in return getting the idealistic experience we see in the movies of a sacred bond between an old crinkly war veteran and a troubled young man who is given direction and clarity in life as a result of the relationship. The true spirit of volunteering, of helping, of giving back, transcends age or preconceived notions. I think it is the words on a painting in Hirsch's own home that might best wrap it up: "The moments that stand out in my life are those at which I have done something to help"

For those further interested in Hands On Tokyo, call Yumiko Tategami at 03-5404-3563, email info@handsonTokyo.org, or see www.handsonTokyo.org.

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