

children keep us young

grey matters by
Ruth Gerzon

Donkeys have been part of my life since I was young and, like children, bring me much joy, and occasional grief.

Uncle Arthur and Auntie Kay, as my two current donkeys are known, provide me with conditional love, love that increases considerably when I offer them banana leaves. The grief and trouble comes when they wander into our home and scoff bananas from our fruit bowl.

I never saw my donkeys as being able to contribute to my longevity until I started to read about the importance of intergenerational contact for older people's well-being. I learned that people over 70 live longer if we gain new, younger friends.

Now I see Uncle and Auntie as playing an essential role in my health: attracting children to our home in a way that I never could without their support. I have to acknowledge that they are, to younger children, much more appealing than I am.

Intergenerational connection is a vital tool to keep us enjoying life as we age. Facing increasing losses of family and friends of our age or older, in the absence of younger friends, we can end up with few intimate relationships to both share joys and see us through hard times.

Yet intergenerational connections benefit more than just seniors. They benefit the whole community. In *The Legacy Project*, Susan Bosak writes that "it's the experience of life in a multigenerational, interdependent, richly complex community that, more than anything else, teaches us how to be human".

She notes the similarities between those at either end of the life course, the young and the old. Our society values adulthood, productivity and activity. The very young and the old, especially once we are less mobile, share a different rhythm, focusing less on doing and more on being, existing in the moment.

In former times, close contact between young and old was a matter of survival, with grandparents watching over the young while parents worked. I know the value of this first hand as my partner's mother lived with us for over two decades, playing a key role in bringing up our daughter while we earned a living.

They say children need between four and six involved and caring adults in their lives to fully develop emotionally and socially. With our nuclear families and fragmented society many children must be missing out, and older adults can fill the gap.

Some of us are blessed with children and grandchildren living nearby, or in our home. Maori tend to be better off than Pakeha in this regard, more often living with whanau of different generations. Mostly this is positive



YOUNG FRIENDS: Ruth Gerzon leads two small children on Auntie Kay.

but, for all of us, it can be a burden if it is not something we seek. Some intergenerational homes form for practical reasons such as the high cost of housing, or the need for grandparents to step in due to parental illness or addiction.

These days there are more older people with no children or only children who live far away. A senior woman recently told me that she didn't enjoy going to local clubs because "All they talk about is their children and grandchildren". She helped me realise that, if you do not have children, such conversations only make you feel more isolated.

Strong, beneficial friendships can form between adults of all ages. In the Coronation Street catchup episodes, Rita is ageing and her mind is not always sharp, but her fiercest friend and advocate is young, loud mouthed, stropky Gemma, who also desperately needs a friend on her side. There are benefits for all in such intergenerational connections.

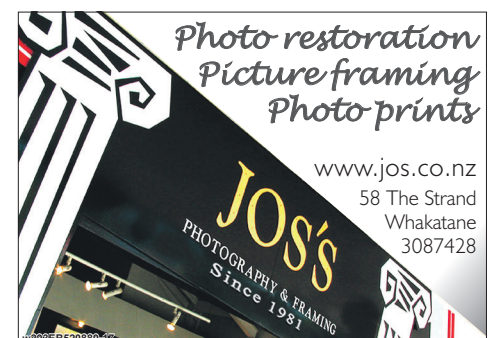
Members of Eastern Bay Villages: Te Kokoru Manaakitanga welcome younger members and have been contemplating ways to bring younger and older people together. One member, a young mother, whose family live across the world, feels that her children will benefit from grandparent figures.

A Playcentre has asked whether we could find older members to visit and share skills in crafts. We have supported a senior to invite a younger person into his home as a boarder.

We have talked about the possibility of intergenerational dinners next year. Over time, we hope to weave people of all ages into the daily lives of those not fortunate enough to own donkeys. If you have ideas to share, or time to give us a hand, do get in touch.



A fortnightly series for seniors by Ruth Gerzon from Eastern Bay Villages.



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Knox Presbyterian Church,
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DAY: Sunday, Nov 4, 2018

TIME: 10:00am

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