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Participants give thumbs up to Giving Back

By CLAUDINE SAN NICOLAS, Staff Writer



Hale Makua clients Fumie Yoshizawa (clockwise from foreground) and Asako Kato work on following their thumbs with their eyes while doing "Lazy 8s" with leaders Loretta Grescham and Eloise Shak Monday morning in Kahului.

WAILUKU – A mentoring program once focused on senior citizens and children helping each other recently wrapped up a yearlong project with seniors helping one another.

And the "Giving Back" project received rave reviews.

"I seem to be more alert and focused after each session," said Theodore Trouerbach, a 74-year-old volunteer mentor from Kahului. "My balance is a lot better. My eyes are more relaxed, and consequently I can see better."

At age 90, Hale Makua resident Matsuko Takahashi said she has found the elder-to-elder exercises extremely helpful.

"It sharpens your mind," she said. "All the things you did when you're little, it comes back."



Volunteer Theodore Trouerbach works with Hale Makua client Asako Kato Monday morning during the mentoring program.

Giving Back, a nonprofit organization, has been running an intergenerational mentoring program for elders and children for the last decade on Maui.

The mentoring program matches senior citizens trained in Brain Gym (exercises to stimulate the brain and body) and communication skills with selected students who have learning challenges and behavior problems.

Giving Back's senior volunteer mentors have been in schools, including Lihikai Elementary School. This year, they plan to be at Haiku and Kihei elementary schools and possibly this fall at the newest elementary school, Pomaika'i in Kahului.

Giving Back Executive Director Karen "Freesia" Peterson said standardized testing has shown children with senior mentors improved in reading, self-esteem, interpersonal strengths and overall social functioning.

The same results were hoped for in an elder-to-elder mentoring program that has been offered at locations such as Roselani Place, the Nisei Veterans Memorial Center and Hale Mahaolu, a senior citizen housing program.

During the last 10 weeks, Giving Back mentors were matched up with approximately 15 residents and daytime clients at Hale Makua.

"They seem to like it, and it does help," said Paula Iiams, Hale Makua's activities assistant and a certified nurse's aide in Kahului. Iiams said she has noticed improvements in balance, coordination, energy level and overall health for those participating in the mentoring program.

She and other Hale Makua staff members have been so impressed by the results that they began to watch the Giving Back mentors at work so that they can learn how to teach other seniors at their facility.

The mentoring exercises run for about an hour and feature activities such as visual tracking, visual and auditory memory activities, games with balls and scarves, creative art lessons and rhythm exercises.

"I think it's stimulating," said 88-year-old Asako Kato, a daytime client from Waikapu. A retired admissions clerk at Maui Memorial Medical Center, Kato said the elder-to-elder program has been a venue to make new friends.

"They're all very friendly and very helpful," Kato said.

The volunteers said they get a lot, if not more, than the elders they're helping.

"We have an effect on each other," said Loretta Grescham, a 55-year-old volunteer from Pukalani. "It's fun to be together. . . . My days are best when I come here."

Eloise Shak, 57, of Wailuku initially volunteered a year ago so she could use the exercises to help her 12-year-old son with his schooling and other needs. She ended up helping other elders.

"I get an appreciation for all the accomplishments they've had, and I remember not to take for granted what I have," she said.

Shak said she's been able to use some of the exercises to relax as she deals with the challenges of raising a 12-year-old boy.

"I've really used them on me to calm myself down when he's acting up," Shak said with a laugh.

Trouerbach, who has been a volunteer on and off for the last 10 years with grade-school students, said he enjoys working with his peers.

"These seniors are more fragile, and they cooperate more than the kids," he said.

Giving Back will return to Hale Makua for another 10 weeks later this fall. The facility plans to use a \$5,000 grant from AlohaCare to fund a 10-week session.

Meanwhile, Peterson has scheduled a free presentation on Brain Gym and its benefits at 6:30 p.m. Aug. 9 in the Cameron Center auditorium. In addition, free volunteer-mentor training will be held Aug. 29 and 30.

For more information, call 573-3109 or visit www.GivingBackMentoring.org.

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