

## **Our Greatest Natural Assets**

Do you think those oil reserves way below the polar ice caps or in hard to reach places all over the globe are our greatest untapped and underutilized natural asset? How about the sun, where we are barely scratching the surface of our use of solar energy? Is the Amazon or the very air we breathe our greatest natural asset?

Yes, all these wonders of nature are worthy of consideration, but aren't we all part of nature? We are the smartest beings, at least on this planet, despite using a small fraction of those complex combinations of millions of neurons that compose our brain. Smart doesn't translate to the most important human traits including a tendency for peaceful resolution, faith, compassion, and depth of character, a nurturing nature and wisdom born of experience. Aren't those among the positives of who we are, representing an unparalleled collective untapped potential natural resource? Sure they are, but we are all so busy being responsible, working, raising children and finding leftover time here and there, that we don't have much left over.

Our truly greatest *underutilized* natural asset, our senior citizens, have much more time in the day to day than the rest of us...and those cherished qualities. Our "greatest asset" overall is our youth, with the well-being of the planet and our future (and theirs) in their hands more than ever in a political environment dominated by worries of war and terrorism. Things move so fast today in this technology driven world of ours, and there are positives in that such as the potential for achievement, but if their parents can rarely slow down to smell the roses, who can teach the children the importance of those needed traits that foster volunteerism or a giving versus taking approach to life, and other critical building blocks of the leaders of tomorrow? Again the answer is our seniors and their interaction with our youth on so many fronts, or Intergenerational Programs.

The National Council on Aging defines "intergenerational programs" as "activities or programs that increase cooperation, interaction or exchange between any two generations. They involve the sharing of skills, knowledge, or experience between old and young." The book Intergeneration Programs: Past, Present and Future, published by Taylor & Francis and written by staff of the University of Pittsburgh substantiates the many benefits in its analysis of many intergenerational programs, and has an appendix with resources of programs that can be replicated.

Seniors grew up in an age before electronics and technology dominated kids' time, when reading was a cherished activity, and as a group, seniors are both understanding and patient listeners too. In years past, it was typical for many generations to live close by, let alone in the same home. Today, the opposite is true, as grandparents often live great distances from grandkids, and their influence is missed. Interaction with others seniors helps fill that loving and caring gap.

The value of intergenerational programs for children includes personal growth, improvement in family relationships, clarification of values, development leadership tools, augment or replace grandparents and or grandchildren, learn specific skills, understand and appreciate diversity, and let's not forget...Have fun!

There are so many programs and activities that can bring seniors and children of varied age groups together to address needs for both, as well as educate and have fun. Programs for the holidays are important, a time when extended family takes on greater importance. Other programs include vacations, such as those offered by [www.elderhostel.org](http://www.elderhostel.org). There are no limitations for seniors, such as the environment, which has been recognized by the Environmental Protection Agency, <http://www.epa.gov/aging/ia/benefits.htm>, where they conclude, “Intergenerational community service programs tend to multiply human resources by engaging older adults and youth as volunteers.”

Combining Childcare Centers in senior housing or long term care facilities leads to benefits on an added level. In 1993, I visited the McKinley Health Care Center in McKinley, Ohio for the first time, which had been developed years earlier by a group of local physicians and included a childcare center that today has 100-150 kids at any one time. It also has an Adult Day Care Center, a skilled nursing facility and residential care for seniors in a 100-year-old former High School with an interior courtyard enhancing safety and interaction. These types of mixed-use locations are not that common, but they are sprinkled within areas nationwide.

The Preschool Senior Companion is one of the foundation Preventive Aging Center’s programs. This program links childcare centers, typically the federally funded Head Start Programs, and three to five year old children with seniors in nursing facilities and low-income senior housing sites. Many seniors in nursing homes are not ambulatory and are “trapped” by medical complexities, and seniors in low and affordable housing are financially limited. Remember, “There but for the Grace of God, go I.” Head Start staff and their children’s parents are ideal participants for senior housing and long term care facilities, which have limited personnel for small children in addition to frail elderly, typically half with dementia or Alzheimer’s disease. For these residents, matches with preschool children who have not yet reached the “age of reason” was the perfect fit, even triggering memory improvement. For free information on how to establish this program from a childcare or senior care facility perspective, contact the author.

Seniors are our greatest underutilized assets, and at the same time there are millions of seniors that need help with what we consider the little things, like cutting the lawn or basic companionship. Helping an elder in any way one-on-one builds self-worth for all generations. In the bigger picture, Intergenerational Programs allows seniors to give back, and will lead to increasing commitments for public and private support to improve healthcare options for seniors and therefore all of us.