

SCHOOL DESK

BY KATE McNEIL



Photo by Stefan Cohen

DAMARRIAS GAY, a second-grader at PS 207, reads with Zelda Levitan at the Marble Hill Senior Center last week.

Reading buddies

It's a Thursday morning and Cameron Lynn Medina and Tiffany Dayton are not in class. Rather, the PS 207 second-graders are talking about the Revolutionary War with a man 10 times their age.

"They want to be actresses," their reading partner, Tom Reilly, said. "Today we're practicing reading with expression."

Two small rooms in the Marble Hill Senior Center are abuzz, filled with children like Cameron and Tiffany, reading to the elderly. As part of an intergenerational reading program, PS 207 second-graders walk down West 230th Street every Thursday morning to read with the seniors.

Deborah Dessaure, the Kingsbridge Heights coordinator for Literacy, Inc., a non-profit literacy advocacy group, first suggested the idea to Dan Schmidt, director of the senior center, in 2002. Since then, the tradition has carried on with more than 100 second-graders.

It's hard to tell who benefits the most during the 45-minute reading period — the kids sharpen their reading skills and in turn, seniors love the company.

"It's so much fun," Cameron said, her eyes lighting up. "There's so much to talk about every week."

Second-graders are a new realm for Mr. Reilly, who taught foreign language to middle and high school students at Horace Mann for 44 years. Mr. Reilly was still quite the teacher with his two young charges. While Cameron and Tiffany read from a historical fiction novel, Revolutionary War on Wednesday, he paused often to ask questions about the material.

"Mist. What's a synonym for mist?" he asked. "It's a little three letter word that starts with f."

Cameron's eyes light up: "Oh! Fog!"

Later, Tiffany offered up "tiny" as an antonym for huge.

The girls' teacher, Alexandra Kravitz, said this informal environment helps children discover reading can be for pleasure.

"I can't provide the one on one with them all the time," Ms. Kravitz said. "The bonds they form with the seniors really help them gain confidence."

Vera Weintraub, executive director of Literacy, Inc., said second grade is a crucial time to develop reading skills: "Before third grade it's learn to read, after third grade it's read to learn. This is such a crucial time," she said.

"The kids are so eager to read here because it's not task driven like school," said Maria Rosado, PS 207 principal. "It's purely for enjoyment."

Last week's event even inspired a special visitor.

"This program is so simple in its concept, but it has so much value," said Jeanne Mulgrav, city commissioner of the Department of Youth and Community Development, who attended the May 17 reading. "Imagine all the benefits. These children are not only developing reading skills, they're developing relationships."

Ms. Mulgrav, who oversees many literacy programs, said while the city is not currently funding this intergenerational reading program, she is "always looking for innovative and creative models to promote literacy."

"The best ideas are homegrown from the communities," she said.

Across the room, Destiny Ramos read Christmas in Camelot to her partner Gertrude Zubisky.

"They're very nice and attentive," Ms. Zubisky said of the students, adding that the program makes her feel "useful."

Juan Ventura, who read Civil War on Sunday with Maria Scull, said he likes reading because "you can find words you don't know."

In the 45-minute reading period, Juan learned the words peaceful, magically, ancient and mysterious.

"I tell Juan whatever he wants to know, if he can read, he can find the information," Ms. Scull said.

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Book buddies

BYANN SANDY, a second-grader at PS 207, happily reads with Helen Jones at the Marble Hill Senior Center on May 17. The partnership offers students extra reading practice and gives seniors some company. See School Desk, page A8.