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'Grandma Joyce' entertains, educates Pittsfield youngsters

By PATRICK HYDE

When Joyce Simard was introduced to a class of elementary school students at Stearns Elementary School in Pittsfield, the children were not completely sure what to make of the 60-something-year-old woman.

Clad in black pants, a bright multi-colored sweater and equally vibrant rainbow socks, sporting her trademark silver hair and plenty of props, Simard looked a little quirky. But Simard was there to entertain - and, more importantly, to educate.

Simard is a nationally respected expert on dementia and Alzheimer's disease. She is also an author, speaker and world traveler. While she works with senior health care organizations nationwide, including EPOCH Assisted Living in Pittsfield, she is just as passionate about connecting young children to seniors.

To the Stearns Elementary school students in the room, she was an older woman who was going to talk to them about their grandparents. At first, they were timid and a little puzzled and reserved judgment. Within no time, though, Simard was on her way. She had them laughing, listening, and, most importantly, she had the children thinking about how they interact with their grandparents, uncles, aunts, neighbors and other elderly people they may encounter.

Simard quickly dropped into her alter ego, "Grandma Joyce," a woman suffering from memory loss. As Grandma Joyce, Simard engages students through fun stories, demonstrations, and interactive activities to demonstrate what it is like to age and lose memory. She brings canes, walkers, wheelchairs and an assortment of other bewildering props for her talk.

"The kids laugh, but they also get it," Simard said.

Simard touched on many common issues with aging. Take hearing loss, for example. She grabbed a student volunteer and had them cup their hands over their ears and while she spoke to them. While the class laughed, the student tried to later repeat what was said, with limited accuracy.



Joyce Simard, a nationally respected expert on dementia and Alzheimer's disease, connects with students at Stearns Elementary School in Pittsfield in a recent presentation.

For vision, she nabbed another volunteer and asked them to hold a baggie up to their eyes and read an item on the other side, with little success. The students begin to see how an aging body functions less and less effectively.

Then Simard moved on to memory, her core topic.

"My goal is to help children to learn how to interact with their elders, especially when the elderly person may have lost some of their memory," she said.

Using a tape recorder, she ran through a couple of experiments, with all children listening in closely as she showed them how the mind acts as a tape recorder. Over time, she explained, the tape recorder is less effective, and for some people, the tape recorder works very little.

"Just because the tape recorder is not working well doesn't mean Grandma or Grandpa do not love you," she said.

Memory is also the subject of Simard's latest book, "The Magic Taper Recorder: Growing Up and Growing Down," a beautifully illustrated children's book written to help youngsters understand how memory works in a fun and understandable way. In the book, Simard traverses a lifetime of

change, from babyhood to end-of-life-issues, topics she rolled through effortlessly with the Stearns' students.

Today, an estimated 5 million Americans suffer from Alzheimer's disease. Simard said children often wonder if Alzheimer's is a "catching" disease. After explaining that no, memory loss is not contagious, Simard explained to the children how to make the most of visits with grandparents.

Simard stressed the positive activities that children and persons with memory loss can do together in a way that enriches everyone's life.

"You can still have fun with visits to uncles and aunts who have lost some of their memory," she said.

Diane Weinstein, executive director of EPOCH Assisted Living, said Simard visits at least once a year to help with resident health programs.

"While she is here, we always try to underwrite at least one presentation at a local school," Weinstein said. "This is really what it is all about, connecting the young with the old in a way that is comfortable for both."

Simard continues her travels throughout New England with public speaking engagements and presentations in the Boston and Cape Cod areas throughout November, which is National Alzheimer's Disease Awareness Month, and early December.

For more information about Joyce Simard, please visit grandmajoyce.com