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JFK students 'get to give' in pediatric ward visit

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NORTHAMPTON - With their Santa hats, holiday bells, walkers and wheelchairs, JFK Middle School students in a typical sixth grade class and those in special needs programs visited peers at the Northampton Nursing Home pediatric unit to sing carols, read winter stories and build paper snowmen.

The smell of hot chocolate filled the air as children's voices sang "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer," "Frosty the Snow Man," and "Jingle Bell Rock." Children with Autism, Cerebral Palsy and other emotional, cognitive and physical disabilities joined in the merrymaking. They smiled and sang, tapped their trays with their hands and hugged their aides and friends.

"This is such an exceptional day because they get to give," said Jen Brown, a substitute teacher in the Life Skills program at JFK. "They all have such big hearts."

For four years, Julie Spencer-Robinson's sixth grade reading class at JFK has met weekly with JFK's Life Skills program for students with moderate disabilities and Hampshire Educational Collaborative's program for students with severe disabilities.

They do the things students always do: read, write and play together. They watch movies, play BINGO and interpret clues in scavenger hunts. In the fall, they put on a Thanksgiving play.

"It's really fun to get to know everyone," said Lilli Strodeur, 11. "A lot of classes don't do what we do so it makes it special."

The get-together at Northampton Nursing Home last Friday kicked off a community service project in which the JFK students will regularly meet patients in the pediatric unit. On their next visit in February, the children will celebrate Valentine's Day.

Friday's trip was the first some middle schoolers have made to the nursing home. They congregated in a room where a paper wreaths decorated the door, red holly berries dangled from the ceiling and homemade candy canes were tacked to the bulletin board.

"I pass by here on the bus every morning, but it's really different inside than what I imagined," said Lilly Ruderman, 11. "It's more colorful."

The room was loud Friday. Music played on the radio as children laughed, crafted and talked. Discussions ranged from "Do you like Christmas?" to "Where are the glue sticks?"

Northampton Education Foundation provided a grant to fund the project.

"It's really kind of mushroomed and grown," said Kevin Mulvaney, director of the Hampshire Educational Collaborative program at JFK. "The comfort level that Julie's kids make with my kids is



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wonderful. I think it makes them feel more accepted - it provides them opportunities to mainstream."

Those connections continue in the hallways, at lunchtime in the cafeteria and years after sixth grade. "It's not just limited to the once-a-week experience," Mulvaney said.

While JFK special needs students often receive services and attention, the gathering at Northampton Nursing Home provided them an opportunity to give joy and make other spirits bright.

"These kids absolutely have something to offer," Spencer-Robinson said.

Spencer-Robinson's sixth-grade students started the school year reading "I Raise My Eyes to Say Yes," the memoir of a local woman with Cerebral Palsy who spent many years institutionalized at Belchertown State School. On Friday they read out loud to their partners in the nursing home, flipping through pages of "The Nutcracker," "Night Before Christmas," and "The Tiny Christmas Elf."

"We learned about disabilities and how hard it could be sometimes, so we decided to come here and make their day better," said Lilli Strodeur.

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