



## Shots

SHOTS - HEALTH NEWS

# 'Grandpas' got together to help kids. Scientists say it boosts the elders' health, too

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By Ashley Milne-Tyte

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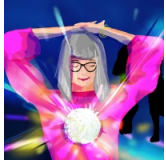


Fourth-graders line up to shake hands with Dennis Cuddy, one of the volunteers with Grandpas United, in White Plains, N.Y.

Ashley Milne-Tyte for NPR

Life after retirement can be isolating for a lot of people, but particularly for older men who were often raised to be providers and built their whole identities around their jobs.

Jim Isenberg, now in his late 70s, knows that feeling. He has had a varied career in transportation and family and youth services in White Plains, N.Y.



#### YOUR HEALTH

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Isenberg is pretty outgoing, so when he first became a grandfather, he wanted to meet other men at the same stage of life to do things together. He went online "trying to find any kind of organization with grandpas. There were a lot of things with grandmas," he says, but nothing for grandfathers.

Isenberg and his friend Frank Williams ultimately founded their own group in 2018. They called it Grandpas United.

Isenberg and Williams wanted to bring retired men together socially and give them a continued sense of purpose by having them volunteer in the community.

"A lot of guys don't play golf," Williams says. "What do you do? You can give back, you can serve."

Williams works as executive director of the White Plains Youth Bureau, and he saw a particular need.

"So many children are growing up without a male figure or a father," he says. "And here we have men who are retiring from work and careers. They have skills."

Skills that can help younger people, especially boys and young men. Williams realized that by sharing their skills and experience, the volunteers wouldn't just help the kids, they would help themselves, he says, by maintaining their dignity and self-worth.

So Williams and Isenberg started popping up at local farmers markets and recruiting older men to join them as mentors, including non-grandfathers. Today, they have around 60 volunteer grandpas in White Plains and a few neighboring towns in Westchester County. The men come from various backgrounds and include retired lawyers and teachers, a longtime delivery guy, a retired truck driver, a former chef and a couple of retired police officers.

Grandpas United works with boys and young men. One of their initiatives is called JumpStart for Dads, which helps new, young fathers adjust to parenthood and learn from the grandpas' own experiences.



Frank Williams (left) and Jim Isenberg founded Grandpas United in 2018.

*Ashley Milne-Tyte for NPR*

They also hang out with kids. Every couple of weeks, a small group of Grandpas United members show up at Church Street Elementary School in White Plains. The guys spend the lunch hour with a group of fourth-grade boys, playing strategy games like Connect 4, building precarious block towers, and playing catch and hacky sack.



"One of the things we've pushed is getting them used to interacting with people who are adults," says John Steward, a grandpa who is a former IT professional.

The socialization lessons include the art of shaking hands, which most of the boys do upon greeting the older men — some shyly, eyes down, some with self-assurance.



#### YOUR HEALTH

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Steward sits down with a 9-year-old student, David, during lunch to show him a game he's never played before. (We're not using David's full name because of his age.)

"He's teaching me to play chess!" David tells a friend, as Steward explains the moves of the bishop, knight and queen on the chess board.

The grandpas say they enjoy the boys' openness and energy. Three of the boys use the same word when asked what they get out of the relationship with the older men: "fun."

When the bell rings for the next period, the boys rush from grandpa to grandpa, eager to get their handshakes in before heading back to class.

Programs like this have real benefits, says Dr. Linda Fried. She's currently dean of Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health. A few decades ago she was a practicing geriatrician and she noticed a recurring pattern in her practice.

"I started having patient after patient ... for whom the reasons they were truly sick, were that they had no reason to get up in the morning," Fried says.

They felt they had no value in society.

That experience galvanized her to start Experience Corps, where volunteers from their early 60s to their mid-80s put in 15 hours a week at elementary schools for

at least a year. Fried says the program had two goals: to improve the academic success of young children and to improve the older people's health.

She lists four things she says are essential for older people's health:

"Their physical activity, their connection with others, their cognitive activity in ways that exercise and strengthen ... memory and thinking," she says. And, finally, "the need to feel like you matter on this planet."

Volunteering delivers all of those benefits.

Fried says Experience Corps — which is now run by AARP — transformed the academic success of children in kindergarten through third grade in cities around the U.S. It helped the volunteers as well. A study on the outcomes of the program in Baltimore showed striking results for men in particular.

"Men who were volunteers demonstrated over a two-year period an astounding increase in the size of their brain," she says.



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**These matchmakers connect teens and elders. The friendships benefit both sides**

Growth occurred in the regions associated with problem-solving and memory. Why? Fried says it may be that because older men socialize less than women to

begin with, the consistent volunteer work — and seeing they were making a difference — did them the most good.

Dawn Carr, a sociology professor at Florida State University, says knowing their community has needs they could fill could appeal to a lot of older men "who otherwise might feel more comfortable in the safety of their house watching television throughout the day, alone, which is actually the activity older men engage in more than anything else," she says.

Carr adds that there's another upside to volunteering.

"You're able to do something where you feel like you have meaning and purpose, but you're doing it alongside other people who have a similar shared purpose," making it easy to form new relationships, something she says becomes harder to do later in life.

Grandpas United member Marc Sharff knows this firsthand. Standing in a corridor at the elementary school in White Plains, he says being part of this group has given him something he never expected.

"One of the things that I love about Grandpas, it's not only with the kids, it's the camaraderie and building new friendships," he says, referring to his fellow grandpas. "There are people I never knew before. We've developed relationships, and I cherish that."

He feels great satisfaction helping boys and young men, while staying connected with older ones.

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retirement   older adults   volunteering   mental health

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