

# Mini-Camp Magic: Centering Community With Intergenerational Activities in Riverdale

Village of Riverdale (Illinois) excels in community expertise and passion to support community members and respond to their interests and needs, including the development of intergenerational programs. Through their participation in NRPA's Parks and Recreation: A Social Driver of Healthy Aging grant, agency staff leveraged community insights and assets to develop three unique mini-camps. Older adults and youth actively engaged in these mini-camps, showcasing their skills in learning and teaching roles.



Older adults and youth line dance at the Harvest Festival. Photo courtesy of Village of Riverdale (Illinois).

## Making a Community-Centered Vision Come Alive to Spark Intergenerational Connections

Before participating in this project, Village of Riverdale did not have a dedicated recreation supervisor. Despite this gap in staffing, multiple key players -- including those within the Riverdale Park District and other municipal services -- coalesced around a community-centered vision for intergenerational programming. This **vision was rooted in community space**, a shared hope to offer welcoming programs in the accessible Riverdale Park complex (including a large green space, multiple buildings and various play equipment). Several key staff took a collaborative lead in making this vision come alive. Riverdale partnered with community stakeholders, NRPA and intergenerational experts to develop multiple community-based programs aimed at connecting people of all ages while strengthening a sense of community belonging.

### Village of Riverdale, Illinois

Riverdale, Illinois, is a small community of approximately 10,000 residents and 3.6 square miles. Located in the south Chicago metropolitan region, Riverdale is known as a “village with a vision.” Among residents, **32 percent** are 50 years or older and **91%** live within a 10-minute walk of a park.



**Everybody has something to offer, even down to a toddler. Just keep giving and keep educating yourself. Don't think because you're [an older adult] senior, you know it all. I still learn something every single day, and I try to pass it on to young people. And you know what I would like to see us do is listen. We have young folk who have something to say. Be that person that they can sit down with and listen.** *-Older Adult Mini-Camp Participant, Age 90*

### Arts, Sports and Tech Mini-Camps, and Community Events



Riverdale youth paint on a community mural. Photo courtesy of Village of Riverdale (Illinois).

For this project, Riverdale developed and implemented three **mini-camps** in which older adults and youth engaged in interactive activities together. Staff partnered with multiple community organizations to recruit participants. **Grown Folks Business Club**, a trusted social hub for older adults, was one of the community-embedded partners. Each mini-camp was offered for five concurrent half days and focused on art (June 2025), sports (July 2025) and technology (August 2025). Community events included a **Community Planting Day** (May 2025) and **Harvest Festival** (September 2025). During the Harvest Festival, community members of all ages participated in line dancing, art and a photo scavenger hunt. An **older adult instructor led the boys' basketball team in a spirited dance** to the popular “Boots on the Ground” anthem!

- **Participants:** The sixteen Riverdale older adult participants were ages **52 to 90**.
- **Activities and Location:** Mini-camp activities included arts and crafts, sports like boxing and co-creation of TikTok videos. Sessions were held at two Riverdale Park District buildings – the Memorial Building and Ivanhoe Field House.
- **Program Impacts:** Among all older adults who participated in this project, **31 percent** reported reduced loneliness, **50 percent** reported improved well-being and **55 percent** expressed more positive attitudes toward youth. Narrative feedback demonstrated Riverdale older adults strengthened their sense of **community belonging**.
- **What's Next?** Staff are interested in continuing to offer intergenerational programs. Having more trained volunteers, such as parents/caregivers, would support this effort.

## Community Impact of Intergenerational Programming



**16** older adults participated in mini-camps.



**40** youth participated in mini-camps.



**206** community members of all ages attended events.

## Anchoring Intergenerational Activities in Community Space



**COVID** kind of made people homebound, but now we want people to come out — you don't have to drive far. Come a mile down the street to the park. Something's always going on. So, we're trying to make sure the community [is centered], to do a lot of things within the community.

*-Riverdale Program Lead*

Considering the mini-camps and community events, more than **250** community members of all ages participated in Riverdale's intergenerational programming. Staff emphasized **community accessibility** and **intergenerational respect** as core indicators of success. Program leaders encouraged older adults and youth to engage in bi-directional learning and teaching roles. When fun activities were hosted in accessible spaces — such as parks — people of all ages made authentic connections and flourished.

## Creating Intergenerational Magic “Takes a Village”

Community-centered values were woven into Riverdale's programming, allowing those from multiple age groups and sectors to experience positive outcomes. Follow these practices to leverage community assets and enhance cross-age connections in park and recreation settings:

- **Engage Community With Respect and Reciprocity:** Community engagement works best when involved players understand and respond to each stakeholder's unique needs and goals. After conducting initial outreach, Riverdale staff regularly attended the Grown Folks Business Club to share conversation and gather continuing feedback from older adults.
- **Listen to Understand:** Community engagement requires deep listening skills. Riverdale emphasized the need to simply listen without the intentionality of changing minds or ways of being.
- **Celebrate the Contributions of All Ages:** When community members feel valued, they are more likely to contribute. From line dancing to creating art, Riverdale celebrated all age groups.

## Conclusion

With support from NRPA, Riverdale developed and implemented multi-activity mini-camps for their community. This effort was highly community engaged and impactful, resulting in improved social connection, belonging and well-being among people of all ages. Join us in advancing intergenerational programming for all!

## About NRPA

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) is the leading not-for-profit organization dedicated to building strong, vibrant and resilient communities through the power of parks and recreation. NRPA advances this vision by investing in and championing the work of park and recreation professionals as a catalyst for positive change in service of parks for all, climate-readiness, and overall health and well-being. NRPA supported Riverdale with technical assistance and evaluation services.



**Our most successful interactions were from the art mini-camp ... the arts provide a natural bridge between age groups and easy opportunities for everyone to be the teacher as well as the student. Memorable moments were when the children got to show older adults the techniques they'd discovered that resulted in terrific outcomes (not always intended) and watching children bloom simply from having the attention of an older person.**

*-Riverdale Program Lead*

## To Learn More

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*This work was generously funded by the RRF Foundation for Aging.*



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