

Growing Values:

CONNECTING WITH THE ELDERLY

by Benjamin Zahler

A few years ago, I participated in a program in which young people help extend a lifeline to elderly, homebound people by visiting them in their homes.

Twice a week, I would travel across town to spend time and play chess with a man named Al. Our relationship became about much more than the game, we became companions. **We both enjoyed these afternoons together as Al reminisced about his life, and I absorbed his knowledge of the past.**

Though it may seem only a small act, I would like to think that in some small way I changed Al's life by showing him that someone cared about him at a time when he was otherwise totally alone. As Rabbi Hillel said, "If you save one life, you save the world."

Al was well into his nineties and living alone (his wife had died several years before). Each afternoon, Al would greet me in the same kind of nonchalant, yet formal way. He always wore a blue button-down sweater with a white and blue striped tie. His voice was slow and shaky. Through our conversations, I eventually learned that Al spoke Yiddish and Hebrew fluently. He had been an executive in the publishing industry and would tell me many stories about books and authors.

One day our conversation turned to crime figures of the past. I asked Al, "Who was the most no-

torious crime figure of all time?" Al answered, "Frank Abagnale, of course." I hastily disagreed:

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"No one has every heard of Frank Abagnale!" I said. But he went on to explain to me the story of the legendary con man immortalized in the film *Catch Me If You Can*. Al loaned me the book as I was on my way out. **It meant a lot to me that he cared about my reading the book he enjoyed. He wanted to share his knowledge and joy for the book with me.**

Near the end of our time together, Al mentioned that his wife had been a proficient chess player. Hopefully in some way, I was able to assuage some of the loneliness

that Al felt in the absence of his wife, and that through our visits he was able to feel a connection

with people much younger than himself.

Who knows, perhaps some of my "youthful exuberance" rubbed off on him! I would like to think that I changed his life by giving him company when he was alone.

I like to believe that I enriched his days on those afternoons we played chess. Though he may not know it, Al touched and inspired me to be a better person. In addition, by feeling a connection to the future through being with a younger person, he passed down history and tradition.

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MY FRIEND AL AND ME PLAYING CHESS.

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Photograph by Benjamin Zahler