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# **The Power of a Simple Call:**

**How Adopt a Grandparent Impacts Older  
and Younger Adults**

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Aging in Texas Conference 2022**



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# The Obligatory

## Participants will:

- Explore the difference between social isolation and loneliness and how sense of purpose is connected to both
- Learn about how the pandemic has impacted social isolation and loneliness
- Learn how the Adopt a Grandparent program operates and the impact it is making on both younger and older adults

Disclosure: This program was funded by the WellMed Charitable Foundation, and we are grateful for its support.



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# What is CARE?

Through connection, consultation, training, research, and advocacy, the Collaboratory for Aging Resources and Education (CARE) promotes issues impacting older adults, policies that support healthy aging, and a better trained senior services workforce.



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**When it comes to recognizing loneliness as a public health issue, compared to other countries around the world, the U.S. is**

On par

Behind

Ahead



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**During my years caring for patients,  
the most common pathology I saw  
was not heart disease or diabetes;**



**it was loneliness.**

**former Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy, MD**

Harvard Business Review



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**True or False: Social isolation and loneliness both refer to when someone feels like they have no one to turn to in their lives.**

True

False



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# Differentiating Between the Two



**Loneliness =  
Perception**



**Isolation =  
Measured**



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Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes on Health, National Institute on Aging, *Loneliness and social isolation – tips for staying connected*, <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/loneliness-and-social-isolation-tips-staying-connected>.



# Breaking Down the Terms

## Loneliness

- When we *feel*/alone or *feel*/like we have less meaningful social contact than what we want to have

## Social Isolation

- Physical absence of social network contacts
- Lack of meaningful opportunities to connect and communicate with others
- No “red line”





**What does loneliness look or feel like to you?**



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# Mythbusters – BBC Loneliness Edition

- It is a myth that:
  - Being alone is linked to loneliness
  - There's a loneliness epidemic
  - Loneliness leads to ill health
  - Older adults are at an increased risk for loneliness



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# What the Numbers Tell Us – Being Alone

**1 in 4**

65+ Texas adults who live alone

**19%**

Travis County's 5-year increase in the number of 65+ adults living alone

**2x**

Women more likely to live alone

**3.6M**

Number living alone statewide



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Sources: Internal calculations based on *Nonfamily households by sex of householder by living alone by age of householder (B11010) American Community Survey 5-year estimates (2016-20)* and the preceding four 5-year estimates; *Population 65 and over in the United States (S0103), American Community Survey 5-year estimates (2016-20)* and the preceding four years. Available from: [data.census.gov](https://data.census.gov).

# What the Research Tells Us – Living Alone

- Some people enjoy (and thrive on!) being alone
- Living alone, in itself, not a good predictor of loneliness
- Many people living alone continue to have strong social supports
  - Adopt a Grandparent Cohort
    - 51% lived alone at program start
    - 90% scored low or moderate on the UCLA Loneliness Scale

**MYTH BUSTED**



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Source: Perissinotto, C.M., Covinsky, K.E. (2014). *Living alone, socially isolated, or lonely – What are we measuring?* Journal of General Internal Medicine, 29: 1429-31, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11606-014-2977-8>; Adopt a Grandparent data (Fall 2021-Summer 2022), internal analysis.

# What the Numbers Tell Us - Epidemic

- Estimated 8 million adults (50+) affected by isolation
- Another pre-pandemic estimate puts the number at 1 in 4 older adults (65+)
- Estimated 42 million older (45+) adults experience chronic loneliness
- Cigna Loneliness Study (2020) – 61% Americans report feeling lonely (50% older Americans)
  - Increased rates, scores from 2018



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Source: Holt-Lundstad, J. (2 Jan, 2018). *The potential public health relevance of social isolation and loneliness: prevalence, epidemiology, and risk factors*. *Public Policy and Aging Report*, 24:4, 127-30 (revised testimony to the U.S. Senate Aging Committee in 2017), <https://academic.oup.com/ppar/article/27/4/127/4782506?login=true>; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2020). *Social isolation and loneliness in older adults: Opportunities for the health care system*. <https://doi.org/10.17226/25663>; Cigna (2020). *Loneliness and the workplace fact sheet*, <https://newsroom.cigna.com/loneliness-in-America>.

# What the Numbers Tell Us - Epidemic

- Fewer people married or participating in religious groups, social clubs, sports leagues
- Average size of social networks shrinking



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Source: Holt-Lundstad, J. (2 Jan, 2018). *The potential public health relevance of social isolation and loneliness: prevalence, epidemiology, and risk factors*. *Public Policy and Aging Report*, 24:4, 127-30 (revised testimony to the U.S. Senate Aging Committee in 2017), <https://academic.oup.com/ppar/article/27/4/127/4782506?login=true>; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2020). *Social isolation and loneliness in older adults: Opportunities for the health care system*. <https://doi.org/10.17226/25663>.



# Demographics and Loneliness

- Morning Consult/Cigna Post-Pandemic Survey (2021)
  - Higher rates of loneliness overall but especially tied to:
    - Minority status (new)
    - Lower income (<\$50K)
    - Medicaid usage
    - Children in the home
    - Health issues
    - Age
      - 79% of 18-24
      - 41% 66+
  - 42% people 18-34 and 16% 55+ reported always feeling left out



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Source: Morning Consult and Cigna (2022). *The loneliness epidemic persists: A post-pandemic look at the state of loneliness among U.S. adults*, <https://newsroom.cigna.com/loneliness-epidemic-persists-post-pandemic-look>.

# Is Loneliness an Epidemic?



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**True or False: According to one study, loneliness has the same health impact as smoking 5 cigarettes per day.**

True

False



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# Connecting Loneliness and Health

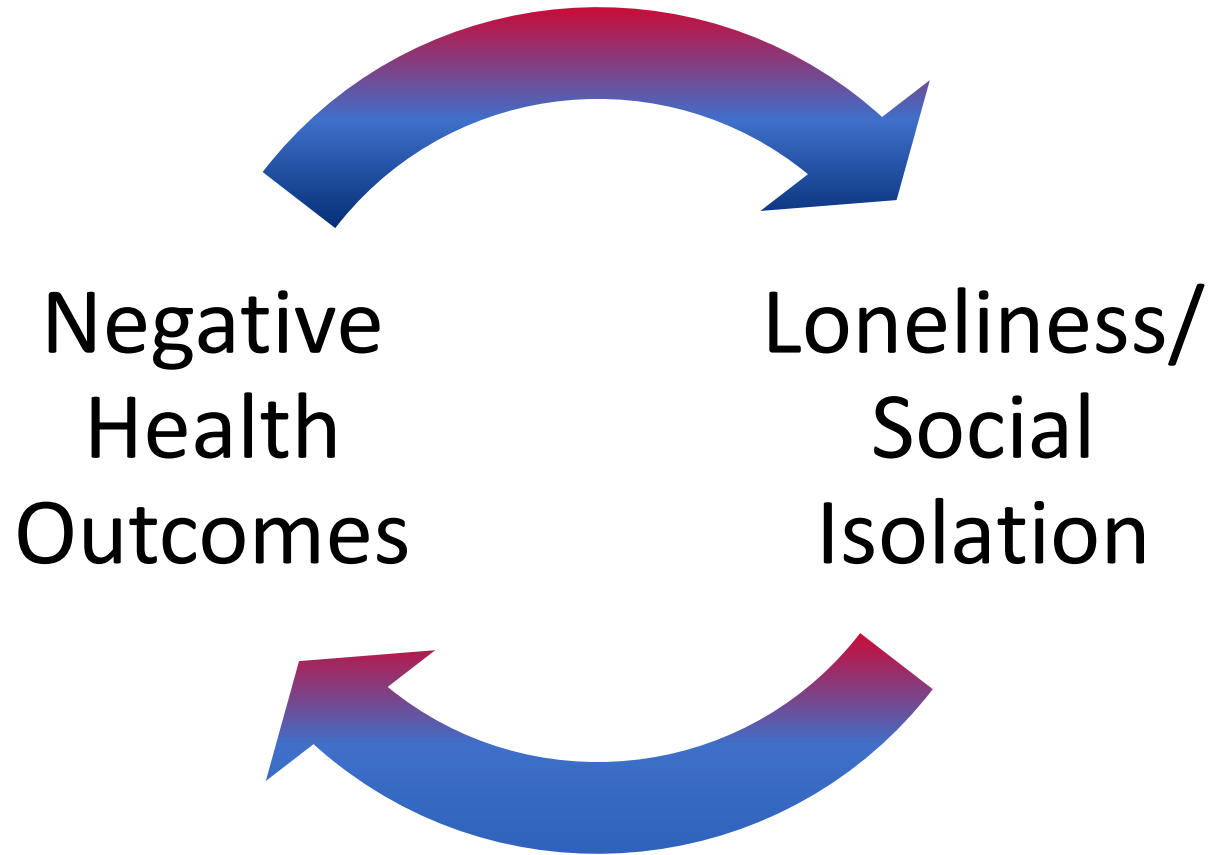
- 30% mortality rate, higher than smoking 15 cigarettes/day or obesity
- Increased cognitive decline and mental health conditions
- Decreases in activities of daily living
- Estimated \$6.7 billion extra in Medicare costs
- Higher risk for suicide
- More overall apathy which leads to everything else



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Source: Texas Department of Health and Human Services Aging Texas Well Advisory Committee. (2018). *Committee recommendation to the Texas Health and Human Services Commission on Volunteer Initiatives* (on file with presenters).; LaSpina, L., Birchander, E. (14 Aug. 2020). *Tips to identify social isolation in older adults* (dental hygienist training course). <https://dimensionsofdentalhygiene.com/article/tips-identify-social-isolation-older-adults/>. Heape, A. (2021, Dec.). *Loneliness and social isolation in older adults: The effects of a pandemic*. Perspectives Vol 6, Issue 6, [https://pubs.asha.org/doi/10.1044/2021\\_PERSP-21-00107](https://pubs.asha.org/doi/10.1044/2021_PERSP-21-00107).

# Connecting Loneliness and Health



**TRUE**



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# Are Older Adults at an Increased Risk?

- Most studies show loneliness more prevalent among younger people
  - Survey designs
  - Agism?
- Older housing/neighborhoods
- Social networks shrink with age
- Life transitions
- Health outcomes/loneliness cycle



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# Loneliness



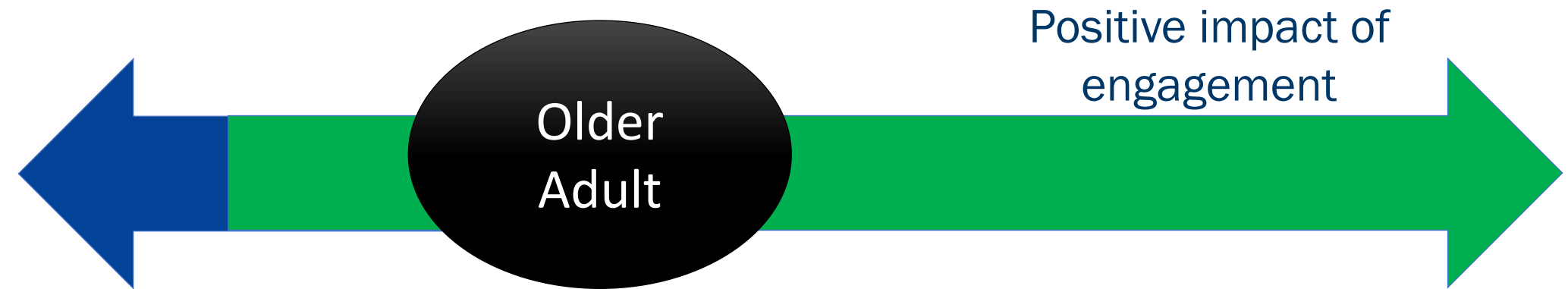
# Sense of Purpose



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# Finding the Fountain of Youth



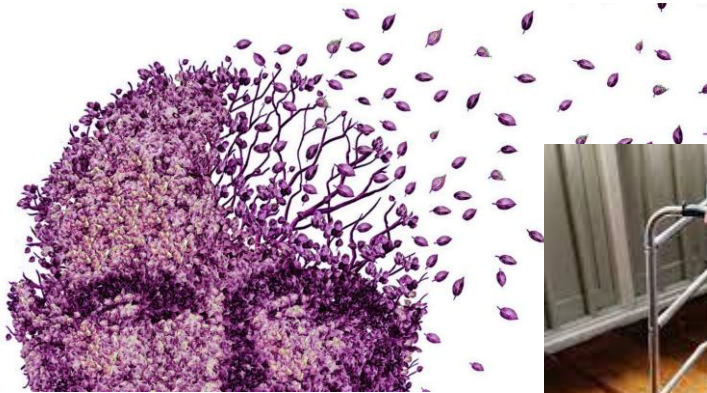
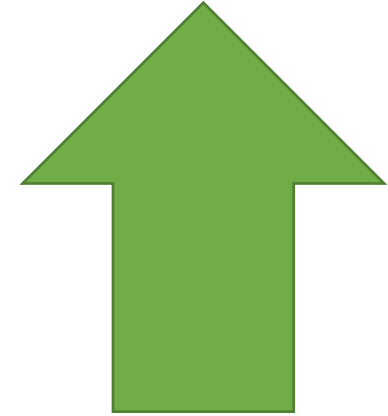
Negative Effects  
of Loneliness/  
Social Isolation

Positive impact of  
engagement



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# Sense of Purpose Research



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# Two of the Biggest Independence Predictors



13%



14%



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# How the Pandemic Changed Everything



Social distance  $\neq$  physical distance



Lost sense  
of purpose



Agism



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**In what ways were older adults impacted by the pandemic?**



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# COVID Particularly Hard on Older Adults

- Less mental stimulation (COVID fog)
- Less movement
- Less nutritional food/less appetite
- Delayed medical care
- More loneliness and mental health struggles
- More exacerbation of previous losses made worse as others began resuming their lives



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Source: Heape, A. (2021, Dec.). *Loneliness and social isolation in older adults: The effects of a pandemic*. Perspectives Vol 6, Issue 6, [https://pubs.asha.org/doi/10.1044/2021\\_PERSP-21-00107](https://pubs.asha.org/doi/10.1044/2021_PERSP-21-00107); Kotwal, A.A., et. al. (2021). Social isolation and loneliness among San Francisco Bay Area older adults during the COVID-19 shelter-in-place orders, *Journal of the American Geriatric Society* (69) 20-29, <https://agsjournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/jgs.16865>.

# The Pandemic's Silver Lining

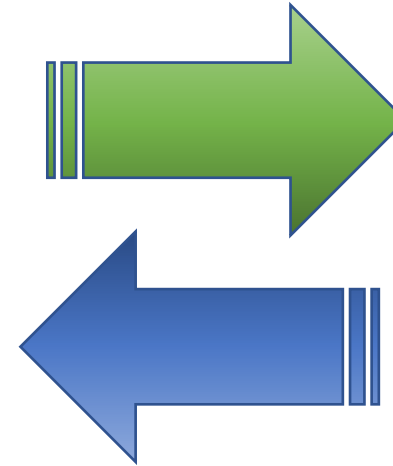
- Communication matters
  - The more an older adult used tech to stay connected, the less loneliness they felt
  - Nearly same impact as face-to-face communication
- For those with access to technology, opportunities to see and do things unavailable before



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Source: Bertic, Z. and Telebug, M. (2020). *Self-assessment of social and family loneliness in elderly during COVID-19 pandemic in relation to current level and type of communication intensity*, Co.. Antropol. 44(4): 209-17, <https://hrcak.srce.hr/file/362938>.





# Addressing a Need and Sharing Lessons Learned: Adopt a Grandparent



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# Our Partner Programs

- In partnership with the University of Houston-Downtown Service, Teaching, Aging, Research (STAR) Lab
- Wellmed Foundation (funder)
- Older participants come from:
  - Americorps Seniors, visually impaired groups, independent living, congregate meals/Meals on Wheels program, cultural or special interest agencies, general volunteers



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# A Twist on Traditional Phone-Based Programs

Participant  
recruitment and equal  
dyads

Unstructured  
conversations  
(time/duration/topic)

Various  
communication  
methods encouraged

Targeted outreach to  
marginalized  
communities

Strong  
intergenerational  
emphasis



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# Tremendous Growth...

- Pilot group (Spring/Summer 2020)
  - 22 students/34 older adults (duplicated)
- Fall 2021-Summer 2022
  - 142 students expressed interest; 95 completed the program
  - 98 older adult engagements; 53 unduplicated; 39 participated in pre/post surveys (81 post-surveys captured)
    - 60% participated in 2 or more sessions (Fall/Spring/Summer)
  - Older adults ranged from 56-93 at start (AVG: 71)
  - 80% Female



# ...And Tremendous Satisfaction



- Enjoyed talking with their student
- Found the experience worth their time
- Want to see the program continue
- Said they definitely want to participate again (94%)



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# “Who got more out of the program....?”

- 73% said both
- “We were both closed in. I was teaching my great grandbaby at home, so I needed an adult to talk to.” - 71-year-old GP
- “I think we got a lot out of each other. I had something to offer because of my wisdom. They had something to offer because of their age.” – 65-year-old GP



# How Students Felt About the Program

- Rated the program 1.5 on a 7-point scale (1 being the highest rating)
  - 98% would participate again
  - “I can tell [my grandparent] really likes someone to talk to. Honestly, I didn’t realize I needed it too.” – P.D., Spring 2022 student
  - “...[T]hose conversations I had with my grandparent will stay with me forever.”
  - “...[T]he program made me realize not every older adult is mean.”





# Measuring Program Impact

- UCLA 20-question Loneliness Scale
- Polizzi Aging Semantic Differential (revised version)
- Surveys for both groups
- Time Logs



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# Loneliness Scale Results (n=39)

- 90% scored low (<34) or moderate (<49) at inception
- 54% had between 0-10% change in their score at most recent benchmark
- 31% had more than a 10% decrease
  - Change in living conditions, very low scoring
- 15% had more than a 10% increase
  - Health challenges, incremental changes



# Challenges with Loneliness Scale

- External factors
  - COVID spikes
  - Changes in living circumstances
  - Health challenges/caregiving impacts – Ms. C's story
  - Collecting the data over the phone
  - Change day to day



# Reasons for Older Adult Involvement

- “...[I]t makes me feel young.”
- “[My student] restored my faith in the younger generation.”
- “Generational differences help me see another point of view.”
- “We uplifted one another.”
- “I felt good that somebody cared about my life.”



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# They Talked About Everything Under the Sun

- Family
- Food (cooking, favorite restaurants)
- Religion (bible study and comparative religion)
- Life goals, milestones, and daily activities
- Recovery
- Career advice
- Life and loss
- Living life with a disability



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# How Participants Viewed Their Conversations

- “We talk[ed] about things they may be afraid to talk about with their parents.” – 65-year-old GP
- “[We] talked about the watch party I threw for the popular Netflix show Bridgerton.” – 68-year-old GP
- I think I had a misconception based on what I have in my life. My [adopted] grandparent was kind, and very independent. I thought it would be...surface level. We talked very deeply about politics, sexuality, gender and religion. It was refreshing to speak with someone who had a different viewpoint than my own.” – Student



# Their Personal Reflections

- “Sometimes if I didn’t have anyone to talk to, it would make my day receiving calls from my student.” – 57-year-old GP
- “We discussed our families, current events, and as always - she provides a multitude of wisdom and insight into everyday life and situations.” – Student
- “It was a special time to be able to talk with a young lady...and learning about her future expectations. It encouraged me to encourage my grandchildren as well.” – 79-year-old GP



# Their Personal Reflections Continued

- “She said its hard to be lonely and even though she has her children, they don’t take time to be with her. It made me [think about] the way I am with my mother...” – Student
- “[My grandparent] told me about her two surgeries she had in the past two years. This made me [realize] how resilient she is. It made me feel that [there are] no excuses to achieve whatever I want to. She is 72 years old, but she has a pretty active life. I loved it! ❤️”  
Student





# The Moments that Stood Out

- “I told her to be herself, and not miss things in her life by being shy. I told her not to be like me and be shut off from the outside life, and a lonely person....I also told another young man, that love can make everything possible. I feel they were no longer feeling down and hung up feeling better after expressing themselves.” – 69-year-old GP
- “The phone call taught me the importance of learning who I am. It also taught me that putting myself first in my early 20s is important as a foundation of my future.” - Student
- “My most favorite moment with her is when I convinced her to go back home during a tornado warning. I was worried about her safety. I felt like I was being more of a grandfather.” – 72-year-old GP
- “I joked about being old in college and he told me he is in his 60s and he hasn’t stopped going to school.” - Student



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# In Their Own Words

- “I learned something that I will take with me about life and the opportunity to [exhale].” - Student
- “I learned of how resilient and dedicated she was even in the midst of all her circumstances. By sharing this with me she inspired me to keep going for my [degree].” - Student



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# Students: Was calling an older adult like you thought it would be?

- “[F]rom my perspective I saw [this project] as boring, [but] when I got to experience it, I saw that it was different, and I liked that whenever I would talk to [my grandparent] it would make my day better and filled with positivism.” – Student
- “Not really because I didn’t know how close I would get to my assign[ed] grandparent. She trusted me and I trusted her.” – Student
- “I wasn’t expecting my older friend to keep \*me\* company.” – Student



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# Despite Efforts to Combat Agism

- “Not at all. I honestly thought this was going to be a crabby old man whose wife has passed away and his kids don’t talk to him.” – Student reflecting how different the experience was from her expectation
- “No, I thought [the grandparent would be] cranky and always trying to give advice. That was not the case. [She] was so much like me [it’s] shocking but I loved every minute talking to her.” – Student
- “No. I was afraid she’d be an old, sad, pitiful, frail lady... in reality, she was...more vibrant and active than I am. She had a life, friends, and hobbies.” – Student
- “Lol NO it wasn’t [what I expected]. I had kind of a bias, expecting my grandparent to be waiting on my call. Or not having anything planned, just sitting around watching TV. Yet, that was so far from it, she actually had a full social life.” - Student



# Pure Magic

- “We talked about how you take time and patience with seniors because the more you learn about them, the more you learn about yourself. It builds trust, understanding, and respect for one another.” - 67-year-old GP
- “At first I was afraid.... I did not want to get comfortable and love [older adults] and maybe the next week or so they pass. [Now] I realize I am much needed in this field and that I can look over my fear....I honestly want to work with older adults now....” – J.O. Spring 2021 student participant



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# Pure Magic



Student DT with his  
adopted grandparent after  
the end of the program



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# Future Plans

- Continue program expansion in the Greater Houston area and beyond
- Replication in other areas



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# Special Thanks

- Dr. Angela Goins, Assistant Professor of Social Work, University of Houston-Downtown (UHD)/STAR Lab Director
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- Christopher Ladewig, Stephanie Balderas, Mary Rodriguez, and Gladys Brew – UHD BSW student interns



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# Connect with CARE

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