

## **Elder Wisdom: Building Bridges**

By Lee Rother, PhD and Reenie Marx

How as educators do we make history come alive for youth who live in a world dominated by reality television and computer generated special effects? How can we bridge this digital and generational divide? Over the last several months students in the Alternative Career Education Program (ACE) at Lake of Two Mountains High School, Sir Wilfrid Laurier School Board, under the guidance of Reenie Marx (SWLSB consultant for the Building Bridges Oral History Project) and their teacher, Lee Rother, PhD, have been involved in providing a demonstration of a cross-curricular, multi-media project that successfully addresses these questions.

The Building Bridges Oral History Project is a highly flexible, student-centered, authentic learning project that is capable of being tailored to meet the academic needs and curricular objectives of the students and teachers who become involved in the project. The ACE students, a highly differentiated group of learners in a 16 plus program, had spent the first half of the year investigating the plight of refugees around the world. For this reason, the teacher, Lee Rother, wanted the students to interview senior citizens who had come to Canada as refugees (or immigrants).

Because The Building Bridges Oral History Project was designed to further the best practices identified by the QEP Reform, students develop a wide range of cross curricular competencies. In preparation for interviewing the seniors, who came from places as diverse as Hungary, Myanmar, Poland, Germany, and Uganda, ACE students enhanced their research skills by using books and the Internet. They had to learn about the geography as well as the culture of the country of the person they would be interviewing. Next, in order to prepare appropriate questions for their interview students researched the specific historical conflicts and struggles which led each senior to leave his or her homeland. Then, using their research and the training they received in active listening, formulating open-ended questions, and paraphrasing, students composed their interview questions which fulfilled part of their English Language Arts requirement. In addition to these curricular competencies, ACE students had an opportunity to practice many employability skills including, interviewing, working in a team, and travel training, all of which are essential to this program. Finally, the students edited their hour long interviews into creative 5-8 minute documentaries, demonstrating their knowledge of digital video cameras, computer hardware, and movie software programs.

The Building Bridges Oral History Project had a positive affective outcome on all who became involved. The ACE students, who often fail to see their true potential rose to the challenge. Their success enhanced both their self-esteem and self- image. Moreover, they came to see that history is a living thing, created by real people, and their respect for immigrants in general and refugees in particular increased significantly. The seniors benefited by feeling a sense of inclusion in the larger enterprise of educating youth. They also got to know individual teenagers and in the process abandoned many negative stereotypes they may have held of young people. And for the teacher and consultant it was an opportunity to be inspired by witnessing students truly involved in their own learning, engaged, excited, and growing through the educational process. These were some of the rewards of being involved in this project.