Older adults in northeastern Minnesota have a deep concern for the younger generation and a desire to help ensure children and youth in their communities reach their full potential and become healthy, capable adults.

In 2007, an extensive regional study of adults 55 and older highlighted a widening social chasm in rural northeastern Minnesota. Decreased funding for youth and senior programming, economic distress and geographic isolation had left small communities struggling to provide for members at either end of the generational spectrum.

Children and youth were hungry for positive after-school activities and caring adult mentors. Seniors had deep concern for young people but faced barriers connecting with them. Both age groups wanted to contribute to their communities and feel valued. They lacked only the know-how to get started and resources to sustain their efforts.

What we’re doing: AGE to age: bringing generations together is a collaboration of the Community Experience Partnership, the Northland Foundation and committed funding partners, along with citizens from 10 regional sites including three Indian Reservations. This initiative links local youth with older adults to build friendships and work together toward community improvement.

How we’re doing it: Each site has participated in an intentional community organizing, planning and project implementation process guided by Northland’s staff. Local coordinators, intergenerational leadership teams and a region-wide learning community have successfully rallied people from ages five to 95.

Through AGE to age, older adults have a new avenue to support the healthy development of children and youth in distinctive ways that did not previously exist in their remote rural communities. They are empowered to:

- Share their stories and draw upon their talents and experience to benefit young people
- Engage with youth to perform volunteer service and be community leaders
- Provide friendship and mentoring to children in need of role models
The goal — and the magic — of AGE to age is the purposeful joining of older adults and youth to create a community of generations. Their collaborative efforts are enhancing the vitality of their towns and promoting the wellbeing of people of all ages.

In Minnesota’s small towns and reservations, there have typically been few, if any, opportunities for different age groups, particularly youth and older adults, to interact in meaningful ways. Hurdles included a lack of organized programming and funding, designated meeting spaces and public transportation. Local sites have not only found ways around these barriers among group members but have also reached out to local senior centers, schools, historical societies and other community organizations. They are spreading the intergenerational word and changing the status quo in their communities.

Just as importantly, change is happening on an individual level. Adults age 55 and older report a renewed sense of purpose. They are getting out of their homes more often and staying active. They have a willing audience for their stories, local history and wisdom. Young people have a channel for their energy and ideas, and are discovering their leadership abilities. Youth are doing better in school, too; several graduates have said AGE to age has motivated them to pursue post-secondary education.

To further support local teams, representatives of all 10 sites meet regularly to share ideas and lessons learned, receive training and gather evaluation information. An annual educational summit engages multi-generational teams from all sites to learn, have fun and network. These efforts have not gone unnoticed. AGE to age has been honored at the state and national level:

• 2010 Excellence and Innovation Award from the Aging Services of Minnesota Association
• 2011 Intergenerational Innovation Award from Generations United

To learn more about AGE to age, contact Lynn Haglin, Vice President/KIDS PLUS Director at 218.723.4040 or lynn@northlandfdn.org.
Ten unique programs. One common goal.

While projects are locally driven and unique to each community, common themes include arts and culture, health and wellness, teaching and mentoring, volunteering, gardening, Native American crafts, and broad community-building events such as barbeques and game nights. Highlights of AGE to age are provided below.

1. Bois Forte Reservation connects generations and preserves native language and culture through beading, oral teachings, cooking native foods and other American Indian traditions. Regular gatherings bring youth and elders together from Nett Lake and Vermillion, two reservation communities that are separated by 60 miles and whose residents have had few opportunities to connect in the past.

2. "AGE to age has included me in activities with older people to improve our community."  
   Lexi Campbell  
   McGregor AGE to age  
   Youth member

3. McGregor's efforts have four main focus areas: arts, community-building, community gardening and beautification, and local history. Social and volunteer service opportunities for people of all ages include an intergenerational writing group, Habitat for Humanity homebuilding, dances, gardening, and documenting and preserving local history.

4. Chisholm offers numerous intergenerational activities to help older adults and youth develop relationships while learning new skills, such as snowshoeing, polka dancing, music, cooking and baking, and woodworking.

5. "AGE to age provides another way to help preserve our Native culture and traditions by bringing elders and children together for learning and friendship."  
   Jackie Kozlowski  
   AGE to age Coordinator  
   Oshki Ogimaag Community School

6. Grand Portage Reservation is strengthening the relationships between elders and children through a variety of activities. Elementary students visit and read stories to elders on a regular basis, while elders visit the children at school during the winter months to tell traditional Native American stories.

7. Itasca Area's three main components are arts, food and nutrition, and the environment. The program encompasses a number of opportunities for older adults and youth that include volunteering at the local food shelf and homeless shelter, making pottery for an empty bowl fundraiser, visiting seniors at the nursing home, playing games, and undertaking other community beautification efforts, such as gardening.
Cloquet builds relationships among older adults and youth while learning, playing and growing together. Activities include social and recreational opportunities, such as game nights, picnics, crafts and baking contests. Older adults and teens are also working together to beautify a local park and make it welcoming for people of all ages.

Fond du Lac Reservation has joined all age groups to participate in traditional activities, such as ricing, sugarbushing, netting, and gathering plants and berries. Elders also connect with youth to pass down and preserve stories through monthly traditional speakers and intergenerational community dinners.

Moose Lake is increasing older adult engagement in the after-school KIDS PLUS program, as well as undertaking a major community improvement project to clean up a wooded riverside area, build a pavilion, develop a farmer’s market, and offer a wide array of activities that encourage healthy living and foster multi-generational connections.

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Overcoming rural isolation.

At 18,000 square miles, the seven-county area of northeastern Minnesota is larger than nine states yet its total population is just 326,000.

Of that, 31 percent are age 55 or older, and that percentage is predicted to climb rapidly over the next decade. Duluth, with a population of 86,000, is the largest urban center. The rest of the region is dotted with 67 small towns separated by vast rural expanses. Residents may drive for hours before reaching a sizeable town. Traditions, norms, and cultural identity vary from community to community.

In addition to a population that is aging faster than state and national averages, much of the region is marked by high poverty rates that have been further impacted by the economic recession. Public transportation is all but nonexistent. Generally speaking, there have been few formal opportunities for older adults and youth to mingle. Together these factors have challenged the vitality of small communities.

So far, AGE to age has merged the energies of 2,400 young people ages 5 to 18; 1,200 adults 55-plus; and 1,350 people who fall somewhere in between. They represent 15 towns with populations ranging from 400 to 11,000, ten school districts, three Indian Reservations, and five counties in northeastern Minnesota. AGE to age is answering a previously unmet need in the region by tapping the underutilized social capital of older adults and young people.

arrowhead region fast facts

1/5 of the population is under the age of 18

Youth from this region are more than 2 times as likely to live in poverty as other Minnesotans

31% of the population is over the age of 55

At 18 people/sq. mile this region is 3 times less dense than the state average

The Native American population is more than double the statewide average
About the partnership

AGE to age is based on a community organizing and engagement model that was created by the Northland Foundation’s operating program, KIDS PLUS, and refined during 20 years of similar community outreach and program development throughout northeastern Minnesota. The Northland Foundation serves as a guide and resource to local community members and offers ongoing financial and technical assistance.

The Community Experience Partnership, an initiative for U.S. community foundations from The Atlantic Philanthropies provided a challenge match to the Northland Foundation for AGE to age. Thanks to the generous support of the following funders, the Northland Foundation successfully met this matching goal:

- Blandin Foundation
- Bush Foundation
- Communities for All Ages, an initiative of The Intergenerational Center at Temple University
- Community Experience Partnership, an initiative for U.S. community foundations from The Atlantic Philanthropies
- Otto Bremer Foundation
- The Sheltering Arms Foundation
- Walmart Foundation State Giving Programs in Minnesota and Wisconsin

In addition to resources from these funding partners and the Northland Foundation, the individual AGE to age sites have engendered a great deal of local support for their projects and activities.

The Northland Foundation is a resource for people, businesses and communities working toward prosperity through economic and social justice in Aitkin, Carlton, Cook, Itasca, Koochiching, Lake and St. Louis counties.

AGE to age: bringing generations together is a program designed by the Northland Foundation to connect youth with older adults to enhance their communities. This initiative provides an avenue for different generations in 10 rural community and reservation sites to overcome age stereotypes, establish friendships and pool their strengths for civic good. More than 2,400 youth in rural northeast Minnesota have been touched by this program, and momentum continues to grow.

Community Experience Partnership is a multi-year, multi-million dollar program that engages U.S. community foundations to tap into the collective and individual experience of older adults. Through research, planning and local projects designed to identify and address key community issues, the Partnership seeks to increase the involvement of people over 60 through paid work, lifelong learning and volunteering—activities that can lead to improved quality of life for others while increasing personal fulfillment. Community Experience Partnership is an initiative of The Atlantic Philanthropies.

Cover photo courtesy of Joe Rossi, Bemidji, MN.