



It would be safe to assume that the majority of people and youth are unaware of the loneliness that occurs within senior centers throughout the country. It has been found that in less than 20 years the number of senior citizens in the country will outnumber those below the age of 18. With this in mind, it is becoming more and more crucial that we learn to care for our elders- that we learn to empathize with them and continue to connect and live with them. There is simply no other option. Instead what we've come to find is that seniors are left to see out their days alone and without genuine care or concern.

When the idea was proposed for GDS to collaborate with Alive Inside, a nonprofit born out of the success of *Alive Inside*, a Sundance award winning documentary highlighting the transformational benefits elders suffering with dementia receive through the power of music and empathy, I was immediately moved to be a part of this project. As someone who has personally seen the incredible benefits connecting with grandparents and elders can bring, I was only more convinced of the importance of this project after my experience. Alive Inside, and its founder Michael Rossatto Bennett, created a simple but powerful tool to help bring music and memories to elders – Alive Inside Headsets. With the help on an online questionnaire, youth engage with elders by creating music playlists and recover memories through the experience and associations.

The experience, though challenging and never quite linear considering the circumstances, was always rewarding. We started in a group, getting to know the seniors at Riverstone Senior Center and what the dynamic was like there. The first day there was actually a birthday party for Robert, a former tennis coach who was well revered in his field. He was turning 98 and listened graciously as each of his fellow elders said their personal remarks. That day I also met Naomi, a woman with the warmest of hearts and brightest of smiles, who I would be pairing up with one to one. After a few weeks of this group setting, we started the one on one sessions.

Working with Naomi was a joy. She was nothing but smiles and good energy and over the weeks that we spent together I knew that I had made an impact on her life. It was indeed challenging as each time I met her it was as if it was for the first time, but each time we connected and I was fortunate enough to hear countless stories of her life, from her youth in North Carolina growing up on a farm, to her time in New York as a college student, to her eventual career as a social worker. For someone who spent decades in the field of public service, it was only fitting that she should have the same support when she needed it herself.

I highly encourage all youth and young adults to never pass up an opportunity to connect with the elders around them. There is so much that we can learn from them because after all, they made it that far for a reason. Listen, engage and be compassionate. Through these experiences the profound benefits of empathic work will follow you for the rest of your life.

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