

## 12-year-old's idea leads to Toronto seniors becoming pandemic pen pals with young teens

Aryelle Sigulim started the program called P.S. I Love You, which has now connected 50 kids with 150 seniors and sparked new friendships.

By [Katie Daubs](#) Feature Writer

Sun., Feb. 6, 2022

At the beginning of the pandemic, Aryelle Sigulim, then 12, wrote letters to her grandparents. They loved it, so she started writing to some of their friends. Her bat mitzvah was approaching, and as part of the preparation, it was important to do something for the community. "I decided to write to seniors to help them with being lonely during isolation," she says.

With her parents' help, she created a pen pal program for students and seniors. She called it P.S. I Love You.

She wrote letters through lockdown, reopening, and back into lockdown, and the program grew. She sat at her kitchen table, pencil in hand, and wrote to her new friends who had lived through the Second World War: Dear Laura. Dear Dora. Dear Aaron. Dear Marjorie. Dear Myrna. Dear Morty. Dear Susan. Dear Jeffrey.

She told them about her week, what she was looking forward to. She learned about their families. She learned about world history.

"It kind of just turned into a conversation."

Laura Greenberg, 93, sits in an empty room of the Kensington Place Retirement Residence in North York. She speaks her mind about everything, including that "bunch of idiots" blocking downtown Ottawa, where she lived for 47 years.

"You'll pardon my English. They peed on the War Memorial," she says, shaking her head in disgust. "They did some awful things."

Greenberg does everything online — including her banking ("I still have a brain," she says) and her socializing. She last saw her family in person in November for her birthday. Her son is a doctor in a hospital, and has to be very careful.

Greenberg says she's not too "bad off" because she keeps herself busy, "But it is a bit boring sitting in your room all the time." she says. "Other times, we used to have a lot of entertainment, we'd go downstairs, we would meet people."

If she gets the chance to do something, "I'm going to go along with it," she laughs.

She is always excited when a letter comes in the mail. She is amazed that Aryelle started this whole thing. "On the ball," she says of her young friend, now 14.

Greenberg does her best to answer all of Aryelle's questions. She wrote about her childhood in Toronto, how she met her husband working at an Ottawa accounting firm after the Second World War, her children, her grandchildren. When Aryelle wrote about a trip to Hawaii, Greenberg told her about her memories of her own sun-drenched trips to the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

They wrote about skating on the Rideau Canal, and their hopes for life to return to normal. Aryelle included photos, and Greenberg kept them in a photo album.

A voice catches Greenberg's attention off screen. It's Rachella Stern, 87, waiting at the door to come in and chat about the program. Stern sits down and removes her mask as Greenberg leaves. She starts by apologizing and saying she can't compete with Greenberg. Her late husband was very quiet, and she became accustomed to silence, so she's not a big talker. But she's been talking more during the pandemic, calling friends and family on the phone because "there's nothing to do."

She doesn't have a computer so she can't wait to open the letters. Her pen pal is Danielle Goldsweig, 15. When Goldsweig was little, it always made her feel grown up to receive letters in the mail. This was a chance to pass that feeling on. "It just seemed like a really good thing to do," the 15-year-old says.

Stern wrote to Goldsweig about her life: how she came to Toronto from Romania in 1964, how her young family rented an apartment downtown. She wrote about her three sons, her grandchildren, her great-grandchildren, all the things she used to cook and bake. Goldsweig included a Romanian phrase in her next letter to Stern's delight and amazement.

The last two years have been "Very hard, very hard," Stern says, shaking her head. "Only because we sit in our room and look at the walls. How much TV can you watch?"

She knits scarves for charity, does puzzles to help pass the time, and she reads the letters again and again.

Kensington is a retirement residence, a mix of independent and assisted living. While the rest of Ontario reopens amid the Omicron wave, residents of many retirement and long-term-care homes still had restrictions on visitors and activities, although the government is easing some of those on Monday. For safety reasons, they've had to get creative with virtual activities and one-on-one programs to keep people busy at Kensington. Danyelle Gatsos, the life enrichment co-ordinator at Kensington, said the program has been "a nice way to connect with people when we have to be socially distant."

The pen pal program is now so big that Aryelle's mom Andrea helps run it. There are 50 students writing to about 150 seniors, with different schools and seniors' residences involved. Community group Living Jewishly supports the program, but it is open to students and seniors of any faith "who need a little smile to brighten up their day," Andrea Sigulim says.

Some seniors have written about their experiences in the Holocaust, other have written about life after the war. One man sent a student a dime because he used to race on the Bluenose. Not everyone is able to write, and that is not a requirement. Some pen pals talk on the phone, and Gatsos helped record a video message at Kensington last year.

It has created unlikely friendships. "Relationships that you never thought would really exist," Gatsos says.

Carol Rothwell, who received Aryelle's earliest pandemic letters, can see the difference these relationships have made in her granddaughter. "Instead of being in an all-kids or teenagers world, she's got some very old friends," the 86-year-old says. "Which is really wonderful."