On Wednesday nights, the residents of Williamsburg Retirement Community in Logan don’t just have manicures or poker to look forward to — they have their “Grandfriends,” too.

“Grandfriends” is the new name of a group of Utah State University students who partner with several retirement communities in Cache Valley to provide support to seniors.

The group is part of the Val R. Christensen Service Center, a unit of the USU Center for Civic Engagement and Service Learning, which just won the federal government’s highest honor for community service.

“I have always really loved just being friends with elderly people. I’m super close to my grandparents,” said Dakota McEwen, a USU student majoring in social work and Grandfriends director. “Often, we don’t take the time to really hear their stories. They have a lot of wisdom I think we can apply to our lives now.”

On Nov. 9, several Grandfriends were at Williamsburg playing poker and painting the ladies’ nails over conversation and laughter.

Charlene Johnson, a Williamsburg resident, said USU students have been painting and polishing her nails for years.

“They just really help us to have a lot of fun; we laugh a lot,” Johnson said. “It’s a bonding time for the girls because we’re having a moment of maintenance.”

But more than that, Johnson said, the USU students who come to Williamsburg every week “help us get a better self-esteem.”

“See how sweet they are,” said Johnson, showing off her polished nails. “They are young and we feel young when they are here.”

Rachael Bott, recreation therapy director at Williamsburg, said USU students and the retirement home in Logan have been working together for several years.

“It’s bridging that gap between generations, especially when there’s so much difference in the lives when (our residents) were growing up and the lives of students,” Bott said. “It really benefits both groups. It allows residents to talk about a life when they were younger, growing in a Depression and war; students are able to hear that and talk about how the world has changed with technology. Then, it’s not so much an ‘us vs. them’ thing.”

“Commitment to community engagement”

USU earning a spot on the Presidential Service Honor Roll for 2015 is a first for the school, the university stated in a news release.

In a prepared statement, USU President Stan Albrecht commended school officials for their work that resulted in the honor.

“As a land-grant university, Utah State has always maintained a strong commitment to community engagement and service,” Albrecht said. “Service enriches the student learning experience, teaches civic responsibility and strengthens communities, and we at USU are always pleased when our students, staff and faculty are involved in service and recognized for their efforts.”

The award is “the highest federal recognition an institution can receive for its commitment to community, service-learning, and civic engagement,” according to the Corporation for National and Community Service’s website.

The President’s Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll recognizes colleges and universities nationwide “that support exemplary community service programs
and raise the visibility of effective practices in campus community partnerships."

The honor roll recognizes institutions in four categories, including general community service, which is the list USU fell under. USU shares the general community service slot with other Utah institutions — Brigham Young University, Dixie State University, Salt Lake Community College, Southern Utah University and Weber State University.

USU credits its Center for Civic Engagement and Service Learning as the reason for getting a slot on the Presidential Honor Roll in 2015. The center combines the staffs of Aggie Blue Bikes, Education Outreach, Service-Learning, Student Sustainability Office, Val R. Christensen Service Center, and Utah Conservation Corps program under one roof.

During the 2014-15 academic year, over 3,100 USU students served 23,500 hours, engaging with local, regional, state and international communities, USU stated in a news release.

In an email to the newspaper, Kate Stephens, assistant director for the Center for Civic Engagement & Service-Learning, said USU is honored to be on the Presidential Honor Roll.

"Being listed on the Presidential Service Honor Roll is a great accolade for USU as it recognizes our drive to increase civic and community engagement across the institution," Stephens wrote.

Stephens stated that community engagement and service is "a great way for USU students to learn valuable professional skills, while making a difference in Utah communities."

"We’re working to provide meaningful service opportunities for students and faculty and build deeper, reciprocal relationships with our community partners," Stephens wrote. "Hopefully, being awarded the Presidential Honor Roll indicates we’re headed in the right direction."

Bott praised USU for being selected for the Presidential Community Service Honor Roll, saying it’s a validation of the good work the Grandfriends program does.

"We’re honored to be a recipient of that service they (the Center for Civic Engagement and Service Learning) give," Bott said. "They definitely deserve that award and that recognition of doing a great service."

Read the Logan Herald-Journal article