



Ave Maria residents pose with their third-grade pen pals before the start of the pandemic.

## Old-fashioned friendships

Writing program allows young students and assisted living facility residents to come together despite being apart

*By Nikki Merritt*

**Residents in the dementia unit of Ave Maria Assisted Living** in Bartlett have partnered with third-grade students at a local elementary school to become pen pals.

This program began when a former elementary school principal became a resident and was having trouble adjusting to her new environment. Looking to provide the resident with some comfort, Activity Director Amber Brown reached out to a nearby elementary school for assignments that the resident could grade. This turned into an idea to have students practice their writing skills by sending notes to residents in mem-

ory care.

A few students came to the facility to visit their new pen pals, but due to COVID-19 they only got to meet one time. Despite the pandemic and schools being closed, one student has continued writing letters to her assigned resident. Even though the pen pals solely communicate via letters, their bond has grown strong, and they have leaned on each other during tough times such as the student's father passing away.

After seeing such a deep bond created by the pen pal program, Brown and the third-grade teacher already have plans to continue it next year. Both feel it is important to foster healthy relationships between the young and the old. For the students, it teaches them to not be intimidated by the elderly or have a fear of senior community living. For the residents, these new friendships mean more than anyone will ever know, especially for those who do not have young children in their own families.