

2007 NEWSLETTER

Gerontology Mentoring Program Strengthened Through Foresight, Generosity of Jay and Edith Stunkel

Jay Stunkel says simply, "We were just interested in making a contribution to the University." And they certainly did.

The Center on Aging is the beneficiary of the generosity of Jay and his late wife, former Center faculty member and Manhattan mayor Edith Stunkel. Almost three decades ago, the Stunkels established an endowment to fund an undergraduate assistantship.

Today that assistantship is supporting a student who is working, under director Gayle Doll's tutelage, to strengthen the Center's mentoring program, helping gerontology students establish meaningful relationships with older mentors at Meadowlark Hills Retirement Community and the surrounding area.

Edith Stunkel was a well-known social activist and community catalyst before her death at 57, in 2001. After earning her master's in social work with an emphasis on gerontology from the University of California-Berkeley in 1975, she devoted herself to issues of aging, poverty and public participation in the community decision making process. She consulted extensively on aging issues and received many awards and honors during her career.

"She had fairly aged grandparents and

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*Jill Fritzemeier, senior in dietetics
and recipient of the Edith L.
Stunkel Endowed Assistantship*

Greetings

from the Center!



Gayle Doll, director, Center on Aging, with Steve Shields, CEO, Meadowlark Hills Retirement Community

Community, has been featured on the CBS evening news. Recently he has been asked to coordinate efforts to rebuild the long-term care system in Ireland. The Center continues to benefit from our ongoing, strong partnership with Steve and Meadowlark Hills.

In this issue of our annual newsletter, you'll read about benefactors as well as Center on Aging faculty and students who are as committed as Steve is to the well being of our aging population. Jay Stunkel and his wife, former faculty member Edith Stunkel (who died in 2001), endowed an undergraduate assistantship that is currently supporting a project to strengthen the Center's mentoring program for gerontology students.

László Kulcsár is figuring out how smaller communities can thrive while attracting a large number of elderly residents. Sally Bailey is studying the health benefits for older people when they participate in the arts. Oscar Dodek is, at 76, the oldest master's student we've ever had. After a long career in medicine and law, he's obviously going for "wear out, don't rust out" as he jumps into his first experience with online learning.

We know many of you have contributed much to the field of aging. Please let us know how you're applying your gerontology education to your career or daily life. Take a second right now to email us at gerontology@k-state.edu. Maybe you could be our next award-winning graduate!

Just a few weeks ago I had the pleasure of presenting Steve Shields, a graduate of our long-term care administration program, with the 2007 College of Human Ecology Public Advocacy Award. I don't know how it would be possible to find a more worthy recipient. Steve is nationally known in the field of long-term care for promoting innovative methods for enhancing the quality of life for frail elders. Within the last year, his organization, Meadowlark Hills Retirement

Profile of a Lifelong Learner

Distinguished new gerontology student plunges in with gusto

What do you plan to do in your retirement? For Dr. Oscar Dodek, a 76-year-old, board-certified reproductive endocrinologist, gynecologist and obstetrician, attorney, and professor emeritus at George Washington University, the answer to this question was obvious: Go back to school.

In August, Dodek began the most recent chapter of his academic career. He started work on a master of science degree via the multi-university gerontology program offered by K-State and the Great Plains Interactive Distance Education Alliance.

The gerontology master's program represents a collaboration among six Midwestern universities, including Iowa State, North Dakota State, Oklahoma State, Texas Tech, Missouri and K-State.

Courses are geared toward working professionals, and all take place over the Internet. The program attracts students from across the U.S. and caught the attention of Dodek, who felt a personal affinity for the topic.

"Besides being an occupant of the demographic group in question, I have a lot of friends and family in this age group,



“The fact that I sit in the corner of my son’s old bedroom and go to school, it’s just amazing to me. It really is an interesting process and, I think, a very effective way of teaching.”

— Oscar Dodek

and to learn about them I thought would be fascinating,” he explained. “I love to learn, so the whole process is very exciting to me.”

Dodek developed his love of learning as a child, growing up in Washington, D.C., where he decided early on to follow in his uncle’s footsteps and study medicine.

“I was going to be a doctor, and I didn’t know what kind, but I knew I was going to be a doctor right from the beginning,” he said. “Even in my high school yearbook, it said I was going to be a doctor. There was no question.”

He went on to earn a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Michigan and a Doctor of Medicine from George Washington University in 1956. Dodek accepted a fellowship at the Worcester Foundation for Experimental Biology in 1963 and studied adrenal function in the experimental group that tested the first birth control pill.

Among other distinctions, Dodek has served as clinical professor in obstetrics and gynecology and clinical professor in steroid biology at George Washington University, as well as co-chair of George Washington University’s Division of Reproductive Endocrinology.

As for his current academic pursuits, Dodek is without question the elder of his gerontology program cohort. However, this is not the first time he has occupied the role of non-traditional student. At age 50, he made space in his professional schedule to attend law school and earn a Juris Doctorate.

“My wife gave me law school for my 50th birthday,” he quipped. “I was still in my practice of medicine, and I didn’t cut back at all at the time. George Washington University had a great evening program.”

During his 76 years, Dodek has obviously spent a lot of time in the classroom, on both sides of the lectern. However, as one who wrote and submitted his application essay in long-hand, the online learning experience of the gerontology program has been a new and challenging one for him.

“I seem to be catching on. It took about a week or so before I really understood how things work, but now I’m all right,” he said. “The fact that I sit in the corner of my son’s old bedroom and go to school, it’s just amazing to me. It really is an interesting process and, I think, a very effective way of teaching.”

Few people dream of spending their golden years in graduate school. However, Dodek is the first to acknowledge he’s not like most people.

“My friends think I’m crazy,” he mused. “They’ve always said I was crazy. They said I was crazy when I went to law school. My wife told me to smell the roses, but the way I smell the roses is to learn.”

If you’d like more information about online gerontology courses from K-State, visit www.k-state.edu/gerontology/distance.htm, or email Gayle Doll, director of the Center on Aging, at gdoll@ksu.edu.

RESEARCH GRANTS SUPPORT VALUABLE RESEARCH

Tuition revenues from distance education funneled back into important projects

The Center's online gerontology courses, offered through K-State and a multi-university consortium called the Great Plains Interactive Distance Education Alliance (GP-IDEA), have been extremely successful. Gayle Doll, director, has parlayed tuition revenues from satisfied students across the country into grants for research projects that directly impact aging populations. The Center has awarded 14 K-State researchers an average of \$2000 each to investigate topics such as therapeutic environments for people with dementia and the chemistry of Alzheimer's disease. Keep reading below and on page 6 to learn more about two recently funded projects and what K-State faculty members have discovered about aging well.

AGING IN PLACE

Nemaha County provides intriguing opportunities
for faculty and student research



“WE CONNECTED THIS RESEARCH WITH OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS WITH SECONDARY MAJORS IN GERONTOLOGY TO DO RESEARCH IN THE FIELD, WHICH IS VERY IMPORTANT,” KULCSÁR SAID.

In rural towns throughout Kansas, large numbers of people are choosing to retire in the communities they’ve called home for years. László Kulcsár (pronounced “kultchar”), assistant professor of sociology, gerontology faculty member and director of the Kansas Population Center at K-State, wants to find a way to make this phenomenon of “aging in place” easier, for both individuals and the state.

With a grant from the K-State Center on Aging, Kulcsár has set out to research aging in place in rural populations, specifically in Nemaha County, Kan. While so many small Kansas communities face serious challenges in meeting the needs of aging citizens, Nemaha County is thriving with its high number of elderly residents. Though Kulcsár has not concluded his research yet, he believes Nemaha County can serve as an example of how communities flourish with a largely older population.

“Aging itself is not a problem. The problem is that community capacity is sometimes not sufficient to deal with aging,” Kulcsár said.

In addition to providing insights on how to help Kansas towns, the study has also created a chance for future gerontology professionals to get hands-on research experience.

“We connected this research with opportunities for students with secondary majors in gerontology to do research in the field, which is very important,” Kulcsár said.

Kulcsár and Benjamin Bolender, Ph.D. student in retirement migration, amenities and community development, spent August to November 2007 studying Nemaha County, which showed a 15% increase in its 60-plus population between 1990 and 2000.

“There are a relatively large number of nursing homes and assisted living centers in the county, and we also found that religion plays a big role in attracting retirees who are former members of the churches in the area,” Kulcsár said.

Kulcsár and Bolender have conducted a statistical analysis of trends, including employment, population and social services. Now they are working with student research assistants Megan Romine (senior, family studies and human services), Brooke Voth (senior, biology) and Xiao Zhang (senior, psychology) on media analysis and key informant interviews to gain more insight about what makes Nemaha different from an average rural Kansas county.

Kulcsár hopes their research will help prove a critical point: that Kansas communities can adapt to better support the aging population.



“Aging in Kansas is aging in place, which means people live here their whole lives. People in Kansas generally, especially in rural areas, are less well off than the rest of the country. When you see aging patterns in Kansas, it usually corresponds with increasing poverty.”

The elderly population also requires more service-related support.

“You have to allocate more resources and social services, especially in health care. You have to think about Social Security. And you have to think about special services these people will need, such as transportation or some part-time employment opportunities.”

His main goal is that the research results are placed into the right hands, allowing communities across the state to benefit.

“We’re going to work with the Extension specialist in aging at K-State, Deb Sellers (assistant professor in FSHS). Then she’ll work with county Extension agents to disseminate that information and help those people,” he said.

“We cannot just do research for the sake of research. It really isn’t worth anything if you don’t take the information and try to help people. Especially for a land grant university like K-State, the mission is really to help the people of Kansas, and that’s what we’re trying to do.”

(Top right) Brooke Voth and Megan Romine interview a local resident

(Left) Research team members László Kulcsár, Brooke Voth, Xiao Zhang, Megan Romine, Ben Bolender

The Play's the thing

Acting class is great experience for actors,
important research opportunity for faculty member

We've all heard that laughter is the best medicine. Drama may be very, very good for what ails us too, especially as we age.

Sally Bailey, associate professor of theatre, registered drama therapist and gerontology faculty member, conducted research this summer to back up studies that show a strong benefit for older people who participate in the arts.

"There's a really strong movement today that the arts need to be part of everybody's life, no matter what their age," said Bailey, who runs K-State's drama therapy program. "We wanted to replicate some ongoing studies that show that weekly participation in the arts helps physical and mental health, along with cognitive ability.

"One major study showed that people who were active in the arts didn't just stabilize, but actually improved. Drama has been shown to be very effective."

With funding from a grant from the K-State Center on Aging, Bailey recruited 11 people for a weekly, one-hour acting class held at Meadowlark Hills Retirement Community

Bailey has now incorporated the class into the training her drama therapy graduate students receive. For instance, the students often team up with the actors in improvisational exercises.

during summer 2007. The project got off the ground with the enthusiastic cooperation of Steve Shields, CEO of Meadowlark Hills and fellow gerontology program faculty member.

"None of them had ever participated in theater before, except for high school plays. And they all discovered that they loved acting! I believe that most people who give theater a try do love it. We're naturally wired for it," Bailey said.

Each member of the class took a pre- and post-test of cognition, mood and physical status. Bailey's research will center on any changes she finds in the participants after she has compiled the results.

The group worked on the fundamentals of acting and basic improvisational techniques, which sparked them to stage a mystery dinner theater production. But first they had to come up with a "whodunit" idea.

"We talked about what was a problem or a puzzlement around here (at Meadowlark)," Bailey said. "The members of the class said the carts they use to bring groceries from their cars to the apartments kept disappearing. They weren't being returned where they were supposed to be kept. So we decided to stage 'The Mystery of the Missing Grocery Carts!'"

Members of the class assumed the persona of someone who might have had a reason to "borrow" a grocery cart. Others became "accusers," tasked with stirring the pot and pointing the finger of suspicion. The group designed the play as a series of characters sketches, with details to unfold over the course of the evening.

The mystery dinner theater drew a packed house of 56 Meadowlark residents. Bailey emceed the event, explaining the problem, introducing each character and giving out

lots of clues, including why each character might be guilty. The actors then scattered themselves among the other diners, engaging them in speculation about which other actors might be suspect.

Bill Johnson, who played Carl Corncob, a gardener, carried a huge carrot that had been chemically enhanced with "Viagra." Although Johnson said that as a retired engineer, he's "not supposed to be creative," he and his wife, Wyoma, who played Nancy Newby, really enjoy the class.

"It's fun to be part of this," Johnson said. "I think it's good to involve the people here. Most of us look for things to do. We may not be very good at it, but nobody cares!"

Marla Bugbee, who played Abigail the Maid, gets involved in everything she can.

"Bob Mills and I are good friends, and when they announced this class, he said, 'I think that will be fun. I think

I'll go.' So I thought, 'Well, if you're going to go, then I'm going to go, too!' And it's been a lot of fun."

As it turned out, all the characters were guilty! All the "suspects" had a perfectly plausible excuse (in their opinion) for appropriating a cart.

The actors had so much fun, they asked Bailey to continue their weekly sessions. Bailey has now incorporated the class into the training her drama therapy graduate students receive. For instance, the students often team up with the actors in improvisational exercises. Bugbee enjoys the interaction with the students.

"They're a good bunch of kids," she said. "It's a lot more fun with them. It's good for them and good for us. They act like they're having a ball and they come back every time."

"We're still improvising and doing other creative projects," Bailey said. "Everybody from the summer (except for one person

who moved) is still in the group, plus two more people. We are exploring the idea of radio theater, and perhaps something special for Christmas."

Though she has yet to review the results of her research, Bailey has no doubts about the value of the acting class.

"Everybody was so engaged and involved. Everybody had a wonderful, wonderful time."



*(Top right) Sally Bailey
(Center) Bill Johnson, aka Carl
Corncob with other actors
(Bottom right) Marla Bugbee,
aka Abigail the Maid*

Continued from cover

she was close to them. She liked working with older people, and I think that's part of what attracted her to this field in the first place," Jay Stunkel said.

In summer 2007, Jill Fritzemeier, senior in dietetics with a secondary major in gerontology, received the Edith L. Stunkel Endowed Assistantship. She spent about 100 hours putting together a structured mentoring program, pairing K-State gerontology students with older adults to improve the students' understanding of aging-related issues.

"I took Introduction to Gerontology from Gayle (Doll) and just loved it. I decided that's what I want to do," Fritzemeier, who's from Stafford, Kan., said. "I applied for scholarships in gerontology and dietetics, and Gayle contacted me and asked if I'd be interested in this project."

Fritzemeier researched activities suitable for older adults and college students on the Internet. She structured them around the calendar year, focusing on each month, holiday or season.

Some gatherings, such as the Mardi Gras Celebration or attending a K-State baseball game together, were strictly fun social events, designed to build the

student-mentor relationship. Others, such as exercise-centered outings during Active Aging Week, had more of an educational component, focusing on the benefits of exercise to a person's overall well-being.

Fritzemeier put together a notebook of activities and other information. She compiled lists of supplies, explained what needed to be done ahead of time, detailed how to carry out the activity, suggested

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snacks, and estimated how long each activity would take.

She also constructed compatibility questionnaires for both prospective mentors and students, digging for information such as how many hours a month participants would be willing to devote to the relationship and what their hobbies or interests were. Both students and mentors will also fill out an evaluation to assess their satisfaction with the program.

She also created two brochures explaining the mentoring program and

inviting interested people to contact the Center on Aging. Although Meadowlark Hills will probably host the activities, any interested older adult – whether a Meadowlark resident or not – could be eligible to be a mentor.

"I think it can really enhance a person's experience to have a mentor, just to have that perspective. I think it's good for people my age as well as older adults to get to

know each other better," Fritzemeier said.

"I'm really glad I did this project. It gave me another perspective into planning events of this type. And the research that I did will really help me in the future when I work with older adults," she added.

If you live in northeast Kansas and would like more information about being a mentor to a K-State gerontology student, please contact Gayle Doll at 785-532-5945, gdoll@k-state.edu. If you'd like to know how you could invest in the education of a young person, please contact Jennifer Rettele-Thomas, director of development, at 800-432-1578 or jenniferr@found.k-state.edu.

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