

Schools

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Students, older adults share their lives

By RUTH SOLOMON
rsolomon@pioneerlocal.com

Northwestern University professor Regina Lopata Logan stood in front of a packed roomful of students and older adults in her class, "Adulthood and Aging," on a late fall afternoon, explaining to the invited visitors the game plan for today's class.

"This is the first of what we hope will be an annual exchange. We started with emerging adulthood, then went on to early parenthood, then middle age, and now we are into late adulthood. We will be talking about retirement, widowhood, moving into different housing. The students have a number of questions they would like to ask you. Do you have any questions?"

Sam di Matteo, a senior citizen with an impish green, said to Logan amid much laughter, "What's your phone number?"

But as the students at di Matteo's table later learn from him, his humor is a coping mechanism he has for dealing with a hard life.

"Keep your mind, body and spirit active. Don't let depression get you down. If you think you have a problem today, there will be a bigger one tomorrow," advised di Matteo.

Loads of questions

Soliciting such advice was one of many questions that students had for the seniors who had been invited to talk with them as part of an intergenerational exchange. Other questions ranged from becoming a grandparent to cherished family traditions to ways they stayed the same or changed the way they looked at life.

"One of my goals for

this class is to make what they study come alive," said Logan, who noted that she takes the students on field trips to the Presbyterian Homes in Evanston as one way to provide them with real life examples of lessons from class.

But Logan said she wanted a diverse group of seniors, and Mather Life-Ways, 1603 Orrington Ave., was able to bring in 18 seniors from its "More than a Cafe" locations on Chicago's North Side and a third on 83rd Street in Chatham, as well as two residents from Mather Place at The Georgian and eight future residents with deposits to The Mather, opening in downtown Evanston in the fall of 2009.

Table talk

Three senior citizens who are regulars at "More than a Cafe" on 83rd Street in Chatham joined retired New Trier teacher Bill Boyd at a table with three college students, Adriana Arellano, Are Funlola, and Tasha Richardson.

Boyd, of Northbrook,



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Maurice Lyons and Carole Biegalski answer questions from Northwestern University students (clockwise from lower right) Allister Wenzel, Rachel Haydemann and Eric Sacks during a Nov. 12 class, "Adulthood and Aging" at Northwestern University's Evanston campus.

said he is planning to move with his wife next year to Mather's new building now under construction in downtown

Evanston.

Asked what their biggest accomplishment is, all four seniors agreed. Children and grandchil-

dren.

"That would be uniform, I think, if you walked around the room here," Boyd said.

But then Edna Drake remembered another accomplishment.

"I was a youth minister, and my first group consisted of six boys, all gang members... I didn't find that out for four months. They would come in like this (and she imitates them walking in a tough fashion) and I'd say, 'You can't come in without a hug.' Four of those kids graduated and went on to college," Drake said.

Depression memories

History also came alive for the college students when senior Charlotte Taylor talked about remembering Roosevelt and the Depression.

"After the Depression,

we had the WPA. We had people training for jobs. 'A chicken in every pot' was the saying. I remember the news came that the banks closed. I remember that vividly. People lost everything." And then she lowers her voice to a whisper, letting the students in on a key secret of investing: "After that, they bought when the market was down. Then it went up."

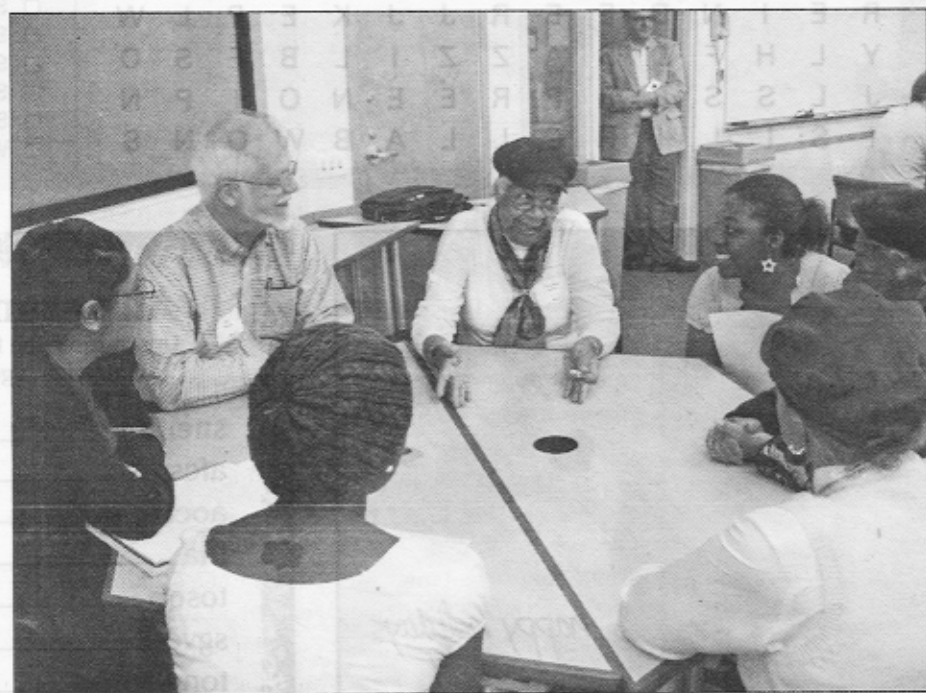
At another table, students also learned that it is possible to live a full life if no children come along. Carole Biegalski, who said she married late in life, honestly answers a student's question, "Do you mind if I ask why you didn't have any kids?"

"I was 36 and my husband was older and I thought I would end up raising them myself. If kids would have come, OK, that would have been nice. But I feel like I had a full life, I helped my sister, I even went to 'Parents without partners' with her. I saw a lot of how people dealt with their lives. Then my sister found this really great guy, and now they have oodles of grandkids, so it's been a very full life."

When the class is over, the seniors, clearly enjoying the chance to share their lives and exclaiming the session was too short, get on the elevators to take them to buses back to their neighborhoods.

The students are equally upbeat.

"I loved it. It was really nice to hear all their stories," said Funlola Are, 20, a junior at Northwestern from Houston, Texas. "I definitely want to stay in contact with them."



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Older adults share their life stories with Northwestern University students.