

Northwestern Neighborhood News

HIGHLIGHTING NEWS AND INFORMATION FOR NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY'S NEIGHBORS SPRING 2009

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Older adults meet with Northwestern students in the adult and aging class through the University's School of Education and Social Policy.

Students, senior citizens bond in class

Intergenerational exchanges open young and old to new ideas and insights

For many of the undergraduates taking Regina Lopata Logan's Adulthood and Aging class last fall, the pinnacle of the course came when Logan invited 27 older adults into the class for the students to meet and question.

"The intergenerational exchange was without doubt the best part of the class," said Northwestern junior Funlola Are, who is majoring in human development. This was an especially pleasant surprise for Are, who admitted that she started the class with some negative stereotypes of the elderly.

"It's not that I didn't like older people, but I didn't grow up around them. I guess I thought of old people as boring, talking too much and unable to take care of themselves," said the Northwestern junior. "Meeting Mrs. Galbreath and the other seniors who came to our class changed all that."

"She just blew me away," said Are of Bonnie Galbreath who, at 78, is almost four times as old as the 20-year-old student. "I really appreciated learning about the lives that she and the other seniors led, and I learned important things from their stories."

Student Benita Chan, another third-year student studying at Northwestern's School of Education and Social Policy, said the senior

citizens — whose visit was made possible by Mather Lifeways — were "upbeat, funny and had interesting and varied life experiences." Listening to the elderly visitors, Chan added, "put a human face on the psychosocial theories we studied."

A diverse group, the visiting seniors were not only from Evanston but also from Chicago's far south and northwest sides. The Evanston seniors were residents of Mather Place at the Georgian or soon-to-be residents of The Mather, a continuing care retirement community that is scheduled to open in Evanston in the fall.

At one table where the visiting seniors and students gathered was a woman who had been one of the first Playboy bunnies. At another was a man who as a Jewish child in Germany hid under a haystack to avoid the Nazis. At yet another was a woman who spoke about marching for civil rights in the Deep South with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

Chan interviewed long-time Evanston resident Mary Potts, who is planning to move to The Mather. Chan titled the class paper she wrote about Potts "Dancing Through Life," referring to Potts' lifelong interest in dance, acting and her *joie-de-vivre*.

The Northwestern junior was impressed by Potts' enthusiasm for acting and learned that the 76-year-old Potts had been hired for the past 16 years by a prestigious Chicago law firm to do character acting in mock trials and deposition training sessions.

"It was inspiring to see such a positive model of aging. Her warmth and enjoyment of the world showed me how aging could be very fun, despite setbacks," said Chan. "I hope that I can be as active and positive about life."

Potts, in turn, said she "thoroughly" enjoyed her interview with Chan and her visit to the Northwestern class. "The students asked us thought-provoking questions about our interests and about the events in our lives that most influenced us," she said. "It was a good give and take between all of us."

Northwestern's Chan and Are not only wrote papers about the two seniors, they also plan to remain in touch with them. In writing the paper about Galbreath that Are titled "Aging Gracefully," the Northwestern undergraduate traveled to the far South Side to meet Galbreath at a coffeehouse for seniors, where Galbreath volunteers at least once a week.

"The place was alive with activity," said Are, of the café called "Mather — More than a Café." Run by Mather Lifeways, the coffeehouse offers not only food and beverages but also activities for seniors that range from computer lessons to blood pressure screenings and access to exercise equipment, computers and day trips.

Galbreath, who in mid-adulthood was a daycare center director, introduced Are to many people in the café before the two sat down to talk. "She asked me a lot of questions, and was receptive and genuine," said Galbreath. "Young people's lives today are very different from the lives we had when we were young. It's interesting for them to learn about our lives and for us to learn something about theirs."

"On the first day of class I always tell my Adulthood and Aging class students that the course should be totally relevant because we're studying the life span, which means that we're studying them, their parents and their grandparents," said Logan, research assistant professor in the School of Education and Social Policy.

Prior to the intergenerational exchange, Logan presented a panel of new parents to her class, and asked her students to question them about that stage of life. Logan,

who directs a longitudinal study of adulthood at Northwestern's Foley Center for the Study of Lives, said that the intergenerational exchange allowed her students to see how the theories of aging play out in real life.

In a "debriefing" that followed the intergenerational exchange, the students commented on how much of what they had read in class about retirement, adjusting to widowhood, health issues and other late adult transitions was borne out in their conversations with the seniors. That's music to Logan's ears who designed the exchange to make the research literature she assigned her students come to life.

By the end of the hourlong intergenerational exchange, nobody — not the elderly, not the students — wanted the session to end. "People were hugging one another and exchanging telephone numbers," recalled Logan. "It was the most satisfying teaching experience because everyone involved enjoyed it and learned so much."

Would she do it again? "Absolutely," said Logan.