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KU News Release

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Graduation stories: Social welfare students raise awareness of aging adults' needs

LAWRENCE — Two University of Kansas students earning master's of social welfare degrees this spring have developed projects at two Kansas City-area facilities that will improve services for aging adults for years to come.

Through their field practicum assignments at the School of Social Welfare, Leslie Fuller of Olathe and Greeley, Colo., and Julia Vering-Young of Kansas City, Kan., each worked with staff focused on aging adults. Fuller worked at Sweet Life of Rosehill, an assisted living, long-term care and rehabilitation facility in Shawnee. Vering-Young worked at the Veterans Administration Medical Center in Kansas City, Mo.



Julia Vering-Young and Leslie Fuller

Both completed their courses at KU's Edwards Campus in Overland Park and plan to attend the social welfare hooding ceremony at noon Sunday, May 18, in the Lied Center.

Their practicum projects were funded with stipends from the John A. Hartford Foundation's Hartford Partnership for Productive Aging Education program. KU's School of Social Welfare has a grant from the Hartford Foundation administered by the New York Academy of Medicine.

Fuller, who left an 18-year career as an insurance underwriter in fall 2006 to earn an social welfare degree, developed a campaign to heighten awareness of aging stereotypes for staff at Sweet Life and teens at Shawnee Mission North High School. Her message focused on wisdom and experience older adults offer society.

Fuller hopes her poster campaign might be marketed to nursing facilities. Using cartoon characters designed by a friend, Fuller's posters helped Sweet Life staffers recognize ageism — especially how it not only can be disrespectful to a generation that provided for stability for many of today's younger adults but also can defeat the will to be independent.

Her posters' characters caution that terms of endearment such as "honey," "baby" or "sweetie" are demeaning to an aging adult. Acts of kindness such as setting a table or sorting laundry for an aging adult who has skill to do these tasks may discourage independence. One poster tackles an ageist concept that older people are costly to society or families. Fuller points out, "Yes, costs are involved, but this generation invested in us. It is not a drain to help them in their later years."

Fuller asked some Sweet Life residents to contribute quotes for the posters. Residents with editorial skills were asked to be editors.

In addition, Fuller reached out to a younger community: students at Shawnee Mission Northwest High School. Fuller found the teens identified with the concept of stereotypes. "They said, 'we know a lot about stereotypes and people making assumptions. People make assumptions about teens, too.'"

One high school student, Emily Lubarsky, developed a monthly column on ageism for the school paper titled "Wisdom Behind Walls."

On May 18, Fuller will juggle her hooding ceremony at KU and the Olathe East High School graduation. She and her husband, Jeff Fuller, a KU alumnus, have two daughters. Fuller received a bachelor's degree in business at KU in 1988 and is a Garden City High School graduate.

After graduation, Fuller will work as resident services coordinator at Grand Court in Overland Park, an independent living facility, providing social services and care coordination for more than 250 residents.

Vering-Young, who began working with older adults in 2001 as a student at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Wash., proposed changes for the geriatric team in the inpatient psychiatric unit at the veterans hospital that involved engaging the older patients and their families more. In addition, she proposed new research on elder abuse and developed a resource guide for staff and caregivers of geriatric patients.

As Vering-Young worked with geriatric patients at the hospital, she was reminded of the value of listening. "In a busy hospital it means a lot (to an older patient) not to be rushed."

Sometimes in that rush, Vering-Young observed, an older patient might sit in a wheelchair in a hallway rather than try to join in a therapy activity. The hospital is implementing Vering-Young's proposal that every geriatric patient be engaged in activities even if it means working one on one.

Vering-Young also proposed a study to determine the prevalence of elder abuse — an understudied area. Only one study of elder abuse at the veterans hospital has been done.

"There is a lot of financial abuse connected with service pensions," Vering-Young said.

The staff recommended that Vering-Young start a screening process to begin a local study. Hospital staff will track demographic data such as age, race, income and military service.

Finally, Vering-Young compiled a list of area resources for families of patients, care givers and other social workers.

"Sometimes doing the smallest thing is a miracle," she said. "If you have no family, no money and no place to live plus have (health) issues — the smallest thing can seem miraculous."

For one veteran the simple act of getting a bus ride to a homeless shelter where he could keep his service dog seemed miraculous, she recalled.

In late April, Vering-Young began working as one of three staff social workers for Presbyterian Manor, a 160-bed skilled nursing facility in Kansas City, Kan.

Vering-Young attended Bishop Miege High School in Mission. Her husband, Lynus Young of Springfield, Mo., and her parents, John and Ann Vering of Kansas City, Kan., will attend the social welfare hooding ceremony.

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