

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*

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