Pace University reaches out to the senior community

By Marion Licchiello-Lenz

Already enjoying a reputation as one of the best programs for students, Pace University’s Seidenberg School of Computer Science & Information Systems program is now reaching out to the senior community. From the simple idea of “Take your grandparents to work day - in reverse” in March 2005, the Westchester County Department of Senior Programs & Services along with Dr. Jean Coppola at Pace gave birth to a life changing program. Pace and Dr. Coppola brought students with laptops to Adult Day Care in Mt Kisco, NY. The occasion was “Hallmark, make your own card” day. Students brought the laptops and the seniors brought the photos. The students scanned the photos as the seniors watched their creations come alive on cards. It was an exciting day for everyone involved.

Dr. Lin Drury and Dr. Sharon Wexler from Pace’s Nursing School are the main partners on Dr. Coppola’s gerontechnology team, along with Professor Barbara Thomas, formerly of Pace’s Nursing School and Dr. Janna Heyman of Fordham University.

After the Hallmark project, Colette Phipps from the Department of Senior Programs & Services in Westchester County and Dr. Jean Coppola kept in touch. Phipps advised Dr. Coppola she had a place for a computer program at the Hebrew Geriatric Center in New Rochelle, a campus of residences and services for older residents providing a continuum of care. Linda Forman, Vice President of Community Relations at the Hebrew Geriatric Center, helped establish the Pace program there. Pace University trains students who then teach residents how to use and navigate computers. They also conduct research on this innovative, award winning intergenerational program.

According to Dr. Forman, “the students and the seniors respond quite profoundly during the course. Each student is matched with a senior and they become new friends.” She has seen many of the seniors gain more confidence after learning a new skill, despite having physical impairments. The Pace students are given instruction and sensitivity training before they arrive and it helps enormously in the success of the program. Many of the senior residents say “I am so glad that I learned how to use a computer so that I won’t be left behind” They know that the world is moving fast and they want to continue to be involved and active. As explained by Dr. Coppola, sensitivity training permits the students to experience what it feels like to be in their 70’s.

Stephen Socci took this course in the spring 2011 and said it was a very rewarding experience. According to Socci, “The part that any student would play in this class is one of a mentor. It’s ironic based on the fact that some students might look to the seniors as mentors.” In this class, the roles are reversed.

Incredible accomplishments come from this class. Older adults know that they can connect with family in ways they’ve never imagined and the students pave the road for them.

There is magic behind the technological minds of this class. Older adults that are partially blind or have arthritis can use their TV screen or use a touch screen computer, putting aside their fears and obstacles. This writer participated in the program, and saw how lives were changed. Not only did I gain a “student” for the semester but I gained a “friend.”

Dr. Forman said “I have personally found it to be a very exciting project because it came from an idea that blossomed into a success story. I especially love working in collaboration with our other partners, Pace University, Westchester Community College, Westchester County Department of Senior Programs & Services and Fordham University. Intergenerational programming is very dear to the hearts of many at United Hebrew. Whenever I see smiles on the faces of the seniors during their learning session I am very joyful because it fulfills our vision and values: enhancing the lives of the people in our care.”

The gerontechnology program has reached out to seniors living in their own home. According to Dr. Lin Drury, an increasing number of seniors are homebound. Bringing computers into their homes helps give them contact with the outside world. The tricky part is that some homebound clients require internet access and can’t afford it. They are unable to pick up a Wifi signal in most buildings. Currently, only seniors who can afford Internet service are part of the at-home program due to lack of funds. Pace continues to ask for money, funding, and equipment and continue to seek grant opportunities. Private donations of computers, tablets, laptops, PC’s, Macs, etc. are most welcome. They are also training seniors at senior centers.

Dr. Drury states, “Seniors get really excited by the fact they can actually do this, having someone sit down and show them with patience how to use computers.” She feels once they know it, they fall in love with it and spend a lot of their idle time reaching out to people. One
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Dr. Jadna Heyman of Fordham University, part of Dr. Coppola's team.

Here is a snippet from a blog written by Christopher Dudek, one of the students, “It is difficult for a person to understand how someone feels until you walk a mile in their shoes, so sensitivty training was a big step in gaining a better understanding of senioer citizens. Getting my hands taped up gave me a good feel as to what kinds of limitations seniors experience in using the mouse; There is a saying that is - you are only as old as you feel, so there could be a person who may be up there in years with a better outlook on life than someone younger.

During graduation, one of the seniors commented, “I did this with much fear and trepidation; I did this thinking possibly I couldn’t do it; but with all the help I got, it made me realize I wasn’t the only one in the class having a lot of struggle with this. I explained the difference between long term memory and short term memory. We are the long term memory and the short term is not for a lot of us. I found out in this class my short term memory is very short. It was a real struggle for me. When I was given encouragement by all the seniors in the class I said you’re just trying to keep me from quitting. There was something in me that wouldn’t let me quit anyhow. The students were the main thing that kept me going kept me going. I appreciate my family, they said they were proud of me and I’m proud of myself.”

A company called Telkin helps a lot with this program. Their website http://telkin.com states: Originally designed to be a “senior friendly” computer, the Telkin has made fans of families and industry experts everywhere thanks to its easy-to-use interface and bright, beautiful design. The elderly and not so tech-savvy will love its simplicity and ability to help them walk on the world of computers and the internet! Dr.Coppola agrees.

When asked how this program changed her life, Dr. Jean Coppola said “I feel it’s my life’s work. It gives me the spirit of giving back to the community. I do it because I love it!” Her mentor, a Franciscan, said “Why don’t you put computer labs in nursing homes?”

Barbara Thomas, Assistant Professor, Nursing, Westchester Community College, also a part of the Pace Gerotechnology Team

The Information Corner

By Jeanette V. Tully

November is National Diabetes Awareness Month. The first step in battling diabetes is a simple finger blood test at your doctors’ office and if needed, then a full blood test.

Many physicians’ offices have brochures explaining the disease, the risks, medications, injections, food plans and exercise programs.

Brochures can be obtained by contacting the American Diabetes Association (they are also conducting awareness walkathons throughout the USA; for one in your location call 1-888-342-2383 or visit their web site: www.diabetes.org). There are many branches of the ADA in our counties so do check your phone directories for the branch nearest you.

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