

Discovery - Learning - Engagement

Spring 2012 Newsletter

The Center for Gerontology Accepted for Membership in the International Association for Gerontology and Geriatrics' Global Ageing Research Network

We are pleased to announce that the International Association for Gerontology and Geriatrics (IAGG) selected the Virginia Tech Center for Gerontology for membership in its newly established Global Ageing Research Network (GARN). Dedicated to building a large research network to foster scientific development of gerontology and geriatrics worldwide, IAGG's goal is to develop international research capacity in aging by involving Centers of Excellence dedicated to research in social gerontology, basic sciences, and clinical gerontology. GARN members will be invited to exchange information about all types of topics related to aging, set up contacts among professionals (specialists, academics, industry, health authorities, other scientific networks), and build collaborative research programs. We are honored to be among the 442 charter members (including 48 from the United States) of the GARN and look forward to working with our colleagues throughout the world to advance research and scholarship in aging.

The Center Welcomes Visiting Scholar: Dr. Eunkyung Kim



In January 2012, the Center welcomed Dr. Eunkyung Kim, professor of Child Development and Family Studies at the Changwon National University in Korea for an 18-month stay at Virginia Tech as a visiting scholar. Dr. Kim received her bachelor's degree in Home Management from Ewha Woman's University (Korea) and her master's and doctoral degree in Human Development and Family Studies from Iowa State University, where she specialized in life span studies. After completing her Ph.D, she worked at the Stanford University Center for Research in Disease Prevention as a research associate. She joined the faculty of Changwon National University (CNU), in 1997. Dr. Kim teaches courses in gerontology, family studies, and research methodology at CNU.

Dr. Kim was drawn to Virginia Tech because of the expertise and research scholarship of Drs. Roberto and Blieszner in the field of gerontology, and the opportunity to advance her own line of research while at the Center. She receives ongoing consultation and support in her data analysis, and volunteers with Adult Day Services (ADS) and the Intergenerational (IG) program. In her involvement with IG, she has seen first hand the benefits of this program for both older and younger generations who participate. She is looking for ways to implement this type of programming in her home country, where an intergenerational divide has become increasingly apparent in recent years.

Many cities in Korea, such as Changwon, have witnessed not only a rapid population expansion, but also a demographic shift, as many rural youth leave their hometowns and villages to pursue opportunities in these urban centers. Consequently, cities have a preponderance of youth, with limited representation of

and exposure to older adults. Dr. Kim notes that currently, rates of suicide are also on the rise in Korea, with the largest increases seen among adolescents and older adults. Her research explores the ways in which disparate values between generations—such as expectations regarding geographical proximity of family members—affect the quality of these relationships and the mutual support that has traditionally been provided through intergenerational family networks.

Another area of Dr. Kim's research focuses on aging among immigrant wives in Korea. In the past 20 years, there has been a growing trend among middle-aged, economically disadvantaged men to marry transnationally. Dr. Kim's research addresses some of the difficulties these couples have encountered in terms of cultural acceptance and integration within their marriages and families. Immigrating to Korea from countries such as Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, and China, these women are often expected to fully embrace their host culture, and at the same time, are discouraged from retaining the customs and cultural values of their home countries. These women also face challenges with being accepted by their husband's families and communities; and because of the significant age gap that exists within these marriages, immigrant women are typically left with little in the way of financial resources and social support upon the death of their husbands. Through these research efforts, Dr. Kim will implement educational programming to raise awareness of the importance of cultural integration among these families and communities.

Dr. Kim will be the featured speaker at the Center's Fall 2012 Research Forum, which will focus on elderly women in Korea. Her talk will explore aspects of women's preparation for late life, concerning such factors as social support and financial resources. Watch for more information.

Dr. Kim has two daughters (ages 11 and 16). Her husband, whom she met while a graduate student at Iowa State University, is a professor of chemistry in Korea.

Center Research Reveals New Insights about Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI)

Examining the Health Impact of Providing Care for a Spouse with MCI

Dr. Tina Savla and Center colleagues, Drs. Karen A. Roberto and Rosemary Blieszner, Matthew Cox, doctoral student in the Department of Psychology, and Dr. Frank Gwazdauskas of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, recently published the findings of their study that examined the health of spouse partners of persons with mild cognitive impairment (MCI). Often regarded as a transitional phase between normal, age-related memory loss and progressive dementias, MCI refers to declines in memory and



executive functioning that may not markedly interfere with a person's day-to-day work or social relations. However, research being conducted at the Center and elsewhere has demonstrated the strain that this condition can place on couple and family relationships, suggesting that MCI may represent a more significant source of stress for those providing care than previously acknowledged.

In light of these new developments, Savla's team sought to document both the intensity and frequency of the MCI-related problem behaviors on a day-to-day basis through spousal care partners' reports of family interactions and psychological well being, as well as physiological biomarkers of stress. In addition to having care partners keep daily diaries, the team collected saliva samples from care partners over the course of a week to measure diurnal cortisol rhythms and capture fluctuations in physiological stress.

The study's findings reveal that behavioral problems and disruptions had a significant impact on care partner stress levels in patterns similar to those identified in the broader dementia caregiving literature.

Of particular interest was the existence of a “sundowning effect”—typically seen among those with more advanced cognitive impairment—in which behavioral problems became more pronounced in the late-afternoon and early-evening hours. This phenomenon was associated with greater negative affect among care partners, and less favorable overall estimations of their day.

These findings make a significant contribution to this area of research, and point to the need for providing support and home-based respite care for MCI care partners. Dr. Savla noted that care partners “are having stress reactions that may put them at greater risk for physical health problems. Helping caregivers learn effective stress management techniques early on may be particularly beneficial for their physical health and psychological well-being, thus enhancing their capacity to continue providing assistance to and care for the person with cognitive impairment over the long term.”

This research was supported by the Commonwealth of Virginia Alzheimer’s and Related Diseases Research Award (Award No. 08-1) and the Alzheimer’s Association (grant # IIRG-03-5926 and IIRG-07-59078). This research was published in the *Journal of Gerontology: Psychological Sciences*, 6, 653-664. doi: 10.1093/geronb/gbr041.

Center for Gerontology Spring Forum

Judy Lear: Aging as a Women’s Issue

On Friday March 16, 2012, in celebration of Women’s Month, Judy Lear, national chair and acting executive director of the Gray Panthers, spoke about her experiences with activism and its critical role in impacting policy and legislation at both national and global levels. The Gray Panthers is a politically active organization promoting social justice, with a particular emphasis on advocacy and advancement of legislation pertaining to older adults and age-related policy in such areas as housing, worker’s rights, and healthcare.

Faculty affiliate Dr. Shannon Jarrott organized the forum. In addition to support from the Center, Dr. Jarrott received a grant from the Virginia Tech Women in Leadership & Philanthropy program and funds from the Department of Human Development to host the event. Approximately 40 faculty, students, and community members attended. In addition, Ms. Lear met individually with several groups of faculty and students.



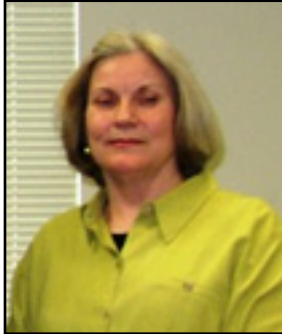
During the forum, Ms. Lear spoke about her involvement with the United Nations and the gender disparities that exist globally, in terms of economics, health, education, and politics. She discussed the important role that the United Nation’s Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) has had in the UN’s efforts to stem the systematic marginalization of women globally. CEDAW was adopted by the UN in 1979, and is often regarded as an international bill of rights for women of all ages. States that ratify this convention are required to enact legislation that promotes gender equality, and to repeal provisions that are discriminatory against women.

In 2010, CEDAW released a general recommendation with specific guidelines for protecting the basic human rights of older women. Ms. Lear spoke passionately about raising awareness of the gendered nature of aging, and highlighted the findings of CEDAW’s recommendation that gender inequality is exacerbated in old age due to social and cultural norms that contribute to such disparities as resource allocation, neglect, access to basic services, healthcare, and opportunities for employment. Ms. Lear also brought attention to the fact that the US is one of only seven UN member states that has not yet acceded or ratified CEDAW.

Although the US has given signatory approval of CEDAW, it is non-binding, and therefore does not mandate accountability for complying with its standards.

Ms. Lear's penchant for activism in the area of aging is revealed in both words and actions. She has been involved with leading protests and attending UN meetings and has been credited with revitalizing the Gray Panthers national network. Ms. Lear ended her talk with a challenge to all in attendance to identify ways in which they can personally contribute to promoting social equality and improving the quality of life for women and older adults.

Featured Futures Board Member: Marilyn Pace Maxwell, MSW



Long-serving Futures Board member, Marilyn Maxwell, will be retiring from her position as Executive Director of Mountain Empire Older Citizens, Inc. (MEOC) in September 2012. Marilyn's 38-year career has been a distinguished one. Under her leadership, MEOC has become a major force in southwest Virginia, providing community-based services for older adults and their families throughout Wise, Lee, and Scott counties. Her tireless support to those in need is widely recognized. The Virginia General Assembly recently passed a joint resolution in her honor, noting, "A vital member of the community...Marilyn Maxwell has generously given of her time and talents to numerous organizations, and earned a plethora of awards and accolades for her service to others."

Marilyn received a Masters in Social Work (MSW) from University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. The social work program had a cooperative relationship with the Duke University Center for the Study of Aging and Human Development; thus, through her coursework, Marilyn was introduced to some of the leading minds in the development of gerontology and geriatrics. It was there that her passion for this (at the time) emerging field of study and work was fueled, as was her interest in planning and community organizing. In 1974, she started MEOC with a gerontology planning grant of \$12,500, and a staff of just one. Currently, this private, non-profit agency has expanded to an annual budget of just over \$12.5 million, employing 327 people, and serving over 5,000 older adults and their families in southwest Virginia.

Having established itself as the primary Agency on Aging in the area, MEOC has a long history of building community partnerships, and has expanded programming to include Healthy Families for Southwest Virginia, The Mountain Laurel Cancer Resource and Support Center, and The Southwest Virginia Children's Advocacy Center. MEOC implemented one of the nation's first rural PACE programs (Program of All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly), and has received recognition from the U.S. Secretary of Transportation for its health and human services transportation system. Marilyn credits much of the success of MEOC to the philosophies of asset-based community development, participatory research, and the "value, validity and importance of building a truly community-based organization."

Reflecting on her time with the Futures Board and collaboration with the Center for Gerontology, Marilyn shared, "I have so enjoyed serving on the Futures Board, and continue to be bowled over by the extraordinary amount of work produced by Dr. Roberto and her partners. I am always learning of new issues, solutions, and research efforts, which find their way into MEOC discussions and actions. Our partnering with Dr. Roberto and Virginia Tech on gerontological research efforts is so valuable to MEOC and those in our region who participate."

Regarding life after retiring from MEOC this Fall, Marilyn states, "I have no definite plans. I have learned through my 66 years that we just don't know what the future holds. So, I have tried to learn to

live in the moment. I have many places to see and things to learn in my next phase of life, and want the freedom and flexibility to have more time with family and friends on that journey.”

16th Annual Awards and Recognition Ceremony

Lessons My Father Taught Me about Aging

On April 11, 2012, more than 60 people attended the Center’s 16th Annual Graduate Certificate and Awards Celebration honoring the scholarship of both students and faculty and their dedication to the field of gerontology. Dr. Keith E. Whitfield, Vice Provost of Academic Affairs and Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience at Duke University, Durham, NC, presented the keynote address, *Lessons My Father Taught Me about Aging*. Dr. Whitfield also holds the position of Research Professor in the Department of Geriatric Medicine at Duke Medical Center, and is the author of numerous research articles examining how social, psychological, and cultural factors are associated with cognition and healthy aging. He is a national expert in the area of health and aging among African Americans elders.



In this poignant talk, Dr. Whitfield shared the recent loss of his father to cancer, and reflected on the ways in which his father influenced his research interests and career trajectory. Among the lessons learned, he mentioned the declines he noticed in his father’s cognitive abilities shortly after taking early retirement. At his behest, Dr. Whitfield’s father became more involved with his community and thereafter regained his previous levels of functioning. It was this experience that impressed upon Dr. Whitfield the critical role that social engagement and volunteerism plays in helping to maintain cognitive function among aging adults.

Conversations with his father also sparked his interest in the phenomenon of “John Henryism” and the ways in which it differentially affects the health of individuals along the lines of race, income, and social status. John Henryism, a coping style characterized by hard work and determination in the face of environmental or psychosocial demands, is associated with positive health outcomes among those with sufficient income, educational attainment, and social support; yet represents a significant risk factor for those with limited access to these resources. Because much of the research concerning differential outcomes of John Henryism had focused mainly on the psychosocial and environmental factors that contribute to disease, Dr. Whitfield became interested in understanding the extent to which genetic factors may contribute to these negative health outcomes, particularly among African Americans. As a result, his research has brought much needed attention to the genetic contributors to cardiovascular disease in African Americans.

Colleagues hold in high esteem the exceptional mentorship Dr. Whitfield has provided students and emerging scholars in the field of gerontology. Among those fortunate to have received his guidance is center faculty member, Tina Savla. When Dr. Savla introduced Dr. Whitfield as the keynote speaker she gratefully acknowledged the influence he has had on her research endeavors and development as a scholar. In his speech, Dr. Whitfield emphasized the legacy of mentorship—one of the most desirable outcomes being “that it creates future mentors.”

Center Awards and Recognitions

Graduate Certificates Awarded

The Graduate Certificate in Gerontology is awarded to Commonwealth Campus students and to master's and doctoral students who complete a set of gerontology courses and research in conjunction with their degree requirements. Students combine their major studies and a concentration in gerontology with the goal of contributing to improving the quality of life for older adults through teaching, research, and practice in their chosen fields.

2012 Graduate Certificate in Gerontology Recipients



L-R: Dr. Rosemary Blieszner, Bradford Wiles, PhD Candidate, Human Development (Child Development), Stefan Pasymowski, PhD Candidate, Human Development (Marriage and Family Therapy), and Dr. Karen A. Roberto

Student Awards

S. J. Ritchey Scholarships (\$2,400 each)

L-R: Dr. Elizabeth Ritchey, Lauren Ermann, PhD Candidate, Counselor Education, Stefan Pasymowski, PhD Candidate, Human Development, and Dr. S. Jewell Ritchey



AARP Memorial Fund Scholarship (\$500)

L-R: Dr. Karen A. Roberto, and Rebecca Bivens, PhD Student, (Adult Development and Aging)



Center for Gerontology Future's Board Scholarship (\$2,000)

L-R: Kelly Munly, PhD Candidate, Human Development (Adult Development and Aging), and Dr. Shannon Jarrott



Vetra R. Mancini & Jay A. Mancini Research Prize (\$500)

L-R: Dr. Tina Savla, Dr. Anisa Zvonkovic, Jing Zhang, PhD Candidate, Human Development (Family Studies), and Dr. Peggy Meszaros



Faculty Affiliate Recognitions

Dr. Katherine R. Allen, Human Development
Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Award, Virginia Tech Center for Instructional Development and Educational Research

Dr. Martha Ann Bell, Psychology
Fellow, American Psychological Association
Fellow, Association for Psychological Science
Senior Fellow, Virginia Tech Institute for Society, Culture and Environment

Dr. Rosemary Blieszner, Human Development & Center for Gerontology
Reappointed Alumni Distinguished Professor

Dr. T. Simin Hall, Mechanical Engineering
Air Force Summer Faculty Fellowship Program
Fellow, 2012 OMR-ASEE Summer Faculty Research Program

Dr. Shannon E. Jarrott, Human Development
Brabazon Award for Evaluation Research, Generations United
Land Grant Scholar Award, College of Liberal Arts & Human Sciences
Making the Case for Intergenerational Programs Award, United for All Ages

Dr. Jihyun Kim, Apparel, Housing, and Resource Management
Paper of Distinction Award in the Consumer Behavior Track, International Textiles and Apparel Association Annual Meeting

Dr. Kee Jeong Kim, Human Development
Virginia Tech Favorite Faculty Award

Dr. R. Benjamin Knapp, Director, Institute for Creativity, Arts, & Technology
Best Paper Award, 2011 International Computer Music Conference

Dr. Matthew Komelski, Human Development
Excellence in Access and Inclusion Award, Virginia Tech Services for Students with Disabilities Office and Office for Diversity & Inclusion

Dr. Michael Madigan, Engineering Science & Mechanics
Liviu Librescu Faculty Prize for Outstanding Accomplishments, Engineering Science & Mechanics
Faculty Fellowship for Excellence in Scholarship, Teaching, and Service, College of Engineering

Dr. Fred Piercy, Human Development
Certificate of Teaching Excellence, College of Liberal Arts & Human Sciences

Dr. Jyoti S. Savla, Center for Gerontology/Human Development
Grant Writing Incentive Award, College of Liberal Arts & Human Sciences
Scholar of the Week, Office of the Vice President for Research

Dr. Cindy L. Smith, Human Development
Brabazon Award for Evaluation Research, Generations United

Thanks for Making a Difference!

Your donation to the Center for Gerontology supports a variety of activities including student travel, special publications, scholarships, and professional development activities. As noted by Certificate and Human Development doctoral student, Stefan Pasymowski, 2012 S. J. Ritchey Scholarship recipient:

“I am deeply appreciative of thoughtfulness and generosity behind the S. J. Ritchey Scholarship endowment. It is an honor to be a recipient of this award, and it will surely ease my financial burden as I work on my dissertation this next academic year.”

Donations can be mailed directly to the Center, or made on-line:

<http://www.givingto.vt.edu/>

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The Virginia Tech Center for Gerontology is a
Collaborating Centre and member of the Global Ageing Research Network in the
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