

Discovery - Learning - Engagement

Spring, 2006 Newsletter

From the Director . . .

Each May, we celebrate Older Americans Month. This year's theme, *Choices for Independence*, was selected by the U.S. Administration on Aging to bolster the efforts of baby boomers and older adults to achieve healthy aging. Understanding the meaning of healthy aging and the experience of a satisfying old age requires consideration of the context of people's lives including their personal abilities and resources, family and friend relationships, and involvement with community and social networks. Because the issues of our aging population are multi-faceted and complex, Center for Gerontology core faculty, faculty affiliates, and students typically work as part of multi- and interdisciplinary teams, merging their individual strengths and expertise as they address key concerns facing our nation in the 21st century. As highlighted in this issue of the newsletter and on our website (www.gerontology.vt.edu), they are spearheading cutting-edge research that contributes theoretical, conceptual, and practical knowledge that supports the multiple definitions of healthy aging and independence in late life.

~Karen

***Dr. Karen Fingerman Keynote Speaker at
10th Annual Gerontology Certificate & Awards Celebration***

Dr. Karen L. Fingerman, Purdue University, was the Keynote Speaker at the 10th Annual Gerontology Graduate Certificate & Awards Recognition Ceremony held April 25 in Fralin Biotechnology Center Auditorium on the Virginia Tech campus. Her presentation was titled, "*You Used to Be More Annoying*": *Emotional Changes in Relationships Across Adulthood*.

Dr. Fingerman, Berner Hanley Professor and University Scholar, is Associate Professor of Developmental and Family Studies. Focusing on relationships in later life, Dr. Fingerman is interested in how people express emotions, the behaviors they use in dealing with their emotions, and how people interpret problems within their interactions with others. She is currently directing a NIA-funded study that examines how parents and adult children perceive and solve problems or conflicts in their relationships. The ceremony honored students receiving the Graduate Certificate in Gerontology and also recognized faculty and student award winners.



L to R: Rosemary Blieszner, Karen Fingerman, & Karen Roberto

Center for Gerontology Awarded NSF Grant to Investigate ‘Aging Families in the Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina’

The Center for Gerontology is among the 15% of applicants who received funding from the National Science Foundation’s Human and Social Dynamics Exploratory Research Program related to Hurricane Katrina. The research team, which includes Center affiliate Dr. Tammy Henderson (Human Development), Center director, Dr. Karen A. Roberto, and Dr. Yoshinori Kamo of Louisiana State University, received a one-year award of \$108,860 to: (1) investigate how aging families are responding to dramatic changes in their daily lives as decision-making is imposed on them by various agencies; (2) identify individual, family, and community level variables that predict effective functioning among aging families under extreme duress; and (3) investigate the impact of New Orleans evacuees on older long term residents of Baton Rouge (the city doubled in size after Hurricane Katrina).

Local agencies in Baton Rouge are assisting the researchers in identifying New Orleans evacuees and long term residents of Baton Rouge. Family members being interviewed include persons aged 60 or older, grandparents raising grandchildren, and caregivers of aging adults.

Unique research methods may have played a role in setting the Center proposal apart. In addition to being interviewed, about 100 of the New Orleans evacuees are being given a journal and disposable camera to document their lives and experiences in the aftermath of this natural disaster.



The team will create a Research Brief, for wide-spread community distribution, exploring the challenges faced by families after this natural disaster. The data will also be used to inform natural disaster prevention and intervention programs for aging families.

Center Teams up with VT-CAVE Scientists and UVA Faculty to Create Virtual Assessment Program for Persons with Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI)

Dr. Karen A. Roberto, director of the Center for Gerontology, and Dr. Doug Bowman, Center affiliate and faculty member in Computer Science, have teamed with Dr. Paul Diamond from the Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation at the University of Virginia to develop an interactive virtual world to assess the skills and functioning of older persons with mild cognitive impairment (MCI).



Safety and daily tasks such as following directions and finding places and objects become more challenging for persons with MCI, but traditional assessment strategies are unable to capture how elders with memory problems manage such common functional tasks such as crossing the street, mailing a letter, and walking to the bus stop. By using virtual reality technology, a city springs to life on animated projection screens that surround study participants on three sides with the sights and

L to R: Lesley Earles & Carlene Arthur navigate inside the CAVE

sounds of a downtown environment. In this virtual environment, the researchers can assess how proficiently persons with MCI attend to everyday tasks. The long-term goal of this project is to develop virtual-based treatments that enhance independent living skills of older adults with memory problems.

Center Faculty Affiliate Selected Delegate to White House Conference on Aging

Dr. Julia O. Beamish, Center for Gerontology faculty affiliate and Apparel, Housing & Resource Management Professor, was selected as a delegate-at-large to the 2005 White House Conference on Aging. The conference, which occurs approximately every ten years, makes recommendations about national aging policies to the President and Congress. She shared her experiences at a roundtable discussion sponsored by the Center in April.

Dr. Beamish was selected as a delegate based on her specialized knowledge of aging and housing issues. The 1,200 delegates at the conference created a list of 50 resolutions addressing six key areas: planning along the lifespan; workplace of the future; community; health and long term living; civic and social engagement; and technology and innovation in the marketplace. The resolutions will be presented to the President and Congress in June. For a complete listing of resolutions see www.whcoa.gov.

Congratulations Carlene!



This fall, **Carlene Arthur**, the Center's Administrative Assistant, successfully completed the Certified Professional Secretary exam thereby receiving CPS credential. The International Association of Administrative Professionals (IAAP) offers a day-long competitive exam twice a year. The exam tests skills in Office Administration, Management, and Office Systems and Technology. Preparation for the exam included lunchtime classes twice a week for four months.

Staff Changes at the Center: Goodbye, Good Luck, & Welcome!

In March, Center for Gerontology faculty, staff, and students said good-bye to Drs. Lisa Barham and Karen Wilcox. A professor of psychology, Dr. Barham spent her one-year sabbatical from the Federal University of São Carlos at the Center working with the Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI) research team. Dr. Wilcox accepted a position with the Jefferson Area Board for Aging where she will be leading implementation of the 2020 Community Plan on Aging and serving as liaison between University of Virginia faculty members and community organizations to facilitate community-based research on aging. Dr. Wilcox was with the Center for three years coordinating the MCI project. We wish Lisa and Karen the best of luck!

Taking on the role left vacant by Dr. Wilcox, the Center has welcomed back former graduate research assistant Nancy Brossoie. In her role as MCI Project Coordinator, Nancy will be conducting interviews and managing data collection. Nancy has been an important part of the Center team over the years and it is with great pleasure that we welcome her back!

The Center also welcomes two new graduate research assistants, Pam Murphy and Lesley Earles. Pam

has a B.A. in Graphic Design, a MBA from American International College, and Virginia Teaching Licensure from Longwood University. She is currently pursuing a doctorate in Educational Research and Evaluation, and is putting her rich experiences and skills to work on the Hurricane Katrina project.

Lesley has an M.A. in Marriage and Family Therapy from Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary and worked as a Pastoral Counselor at Presbyterian Homes of Louisville. She is currently a doctoral student in the Marriage and Family Therapy program. Lesley is involved with the CAVE and Rural Older Women's Health and Quality of Life projects.



The Center would like to extend a warm thank you to ambassador Ashley Welsford, and undergraduate volunteer, Michelle Shea.

Front row, L to R: Nancy Brossoie, Brianne Winston, Pam Murphy; center row, L to R: Erica Husser, Lesley Earles, Carlene Arthur; back row, L to R: Karen Roberto, Lisa Barham, Rosemary Blieszner, Karen Wilcox

Center for Gerontology Staff

Karen A. Roberto, Ph.D., Professor & Director

Rosemary Blieszner, Ph.D., Alumni Distinguished Professor & Associate Director

Carlene Arthur, Administrative Assistant

Nancy Brossoie, Project Coordinator

Erica Husser, Lesley Earles, Pamela Murphy, Brianne Winston, Graduate Assistants

Ashley Welsford, Michelle Shea, Undergraduate Assistants

Contributing to the Center for Gerontology does make a difference!

Please make a contribution now to help support ongoing gerontology programs such as student travel, special publications, scholarships, and professional development activities. Visit www.givingto.vt.edu or the Center for Gerontology's website at www.gerontology.vt.edu.

Contact Us

Center for Gerontology
237 Wallace Hall (0426)
Blacksburg, Virginia 24061
Phone: (540) 231-7657 Fax: (540) 231-7157
<http://www.gerontology.vt.edu>
gero@vt.edu

*"Virginia Tech hires only U.S. citizens and those eligible to work in the U.S."
Virginia Tech is an Equal Opportunity/
Affirmative Action Employer*