

Discovery - Learning - Engagement

*Fall 2011 Newsletter*

*Center Affiliates' Research Leads to Important Policy Change*

*Improving Supplemental Nutritional Programming for Grandparent-Headed Households*

The Grandparents Raising Grandchildren and Virginia WIC (Women, Infants and Children) study led by Dr. Megan Dolbin-MacNab, Associate Professor of Human Development, and Elena Serrano, Associate Professor of Human Nutrition, Foods, and Exercise, along with project consultant and Director of the Center for Gerontology, Dr. Karen Roberto, is well underway. Now in its second year, this study aims to assist Virginia WIC in finding ways to better meet the nutritional and service needs of children being raised by grandparents.



Already, the project findings have made a substantial impact on Virginia WIC policies and the ability of grandparents to receive WIC benefits for their grandchildren. The research team recently concluded content analyses of WIC policy documents and educational materials, telephone interviews with grandparents caring for WIC-enrolled grandchildren, and focus groups with professionals who work with grandparent-headed families. Dr. Serrano noted,

“The focus groups were designed to solicit input about strengths and challenges unique to this population, as well as insights about the effectiveness of WIC in addressing these families’ needs. The results really highlighted the unique challenges facing this dynamic and growing group of caregivers, and helped identify opportunities to improve WIC services for them.”

Based on the team’s findings and recommendations, Virginia WIC has modified their caretaker policy (with USDA approval) by adding a provision that makes WIC services more accessible for grandchildren who are being raised by grandparents. This policy revision represents a significant step toward Virginia WIC’s goal of providing services and support to a population that has historically been underserved and in need of nutritional assistance. The new caretaker policy is a prime example of research findings and recommendations translating into practice, and having a direct impact on the lives of needy families. Dr. Dolbin-MacNab noted, “This policy change is very exciting as it makes it easier for Virginia grandparents to receive nutritional services for their grandchildren. Obtaining services can be difficult for many grandparents, and it’s wonderful to know that this research played a role in helping more Virginia families get the help they need.”



The research team is now collecting and analyzing survey data from WIC staff, and conducting interviews with grandparent-headed families not enrolled in the Virginia WIC program. Going forward, the team will use their research findings to develop practice briefs, outreach materials geared towards grandparent-headed families and the professionals who serve them, as well as a training curriculum for WIC staff. These materials should further assist Virginia WIC in providing the best services possible to a growing family form.

## *New Funded Projects*

Dr. Karen Roberto has teamed up with Dr. Thurmon Lockhart, Associate Professor in the Virginia Tech Grado Department of Industrial and Systems Engineering, Dr. Dong Ha, Professor of computer and electrical engineering, and Dr. John Lach at the University of Virginia on a project to prevent falls among older adults. With a \$1.2 million grant from the National Science Foundation's Smart Health and Wellbeing Program, the team is creating a portable fall prediction monitoring system for early detection of fall risks. This technology affords the opportunity for early diagnosis and treatment before a fall occurs, reducing long-term health effects and injuries, delaying long-term care placement, and ultimately, helping to improve quality of life. Watch future newsletters for more information about the project as it unfolds.



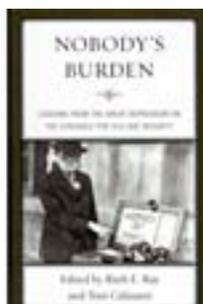
The Center for Gerontology continues its academic-community partnership with the Women's Resource Center of the New River Valley (WRC). Dr. Nancy Brossoie, Senior Research Associate at the Center, is consulting with WRC on a new project funded by Virginia's Family and Children's Trust. The project goal is to help raise awareness of elder abuse as a significant social and public health problem. This winter, the WRC is offering a series of presentations to members of the faith community and the general public about family violence in late life, and providing guidelines and protocols for responses to disclosed or suspected abuse. The WRC will also host a one-day conference on elder abuse for 120 community service professionals from the New River Valley in March, 2012. At the conference Drs. Karen Roberto and Pamela Teaster (former Center faculty member and Certificate Alumna) will present findings from their collaborative research on financial abuse and sexual abuse of older adults.

## *On the Bookshelf*



A new book by Dr. Rosemary Blieszner, Associate Director, Center for Gerontology, and Alumni Distinguished Professor, Human Development, and Certificate Alumna, Dr. Janet Ramsey, is soon to be released. *Spiritual Resiliency and Aging: Hope, Relationality, and the Creative Self* is a follow-up to their previous research on spiritual resiliency in older women. In this new book, Drs. Blieszner and Ramsey challenge the prevailing tendencies of society to either deny the reality of aging, or to romanticize it unrealistically. Integrating both psychosocial and theological perspectives on aging in their analysis of interview data with men and women in the US and Germany, they emphasize that spirituality is an essential resource in late life, and offer

useful recommendations for scholars, educators, and practitioners in bringing forth this integral component of the lives of older adults. (Baywood Publishing, [www.baywood.com](http://www.baywood.com))

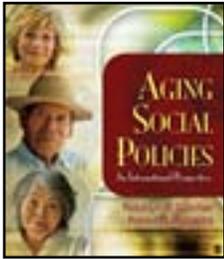


Dr. Toni Calasanti, Professor of Sociology, and Center faculty affiliate recently edited a book-length, interdisciplinary monograph, *Nobody's Burden: Lessons on Old Age from the Great Depression*, with colleague, Dr. Ruth E. Ray, Professor of English at Wayne State University, along with an archival research group representing multiple academic disciplines. In times such as the Great Depression, the societal forces of ageism, as well as the limitations of elder care, become all the more apparent. Using the Depression era as a cultural backdrop, Dr. Calasanti and Dr. Ray highlight the need for shared responsibility

in providing elder care and call for a reexamination of old-age policy and reform in the present day. (Lexington Books, 2011, [www.lexingtonbooks.com](http://www.lexingtonbooks.com))



Dr. Karen Roberto is co-editor of, *Resilience in Aging: Concepts, Research, and Outcomes*, with Drs. Barbara Resnick (University of Maryland) and Lisa P. Gwyther (Duke University). This book highlights the importance of resiliency in promoting successful aging and quality of life of older adults across various clinical contexts. It offers clinical guidelines, case examples, and interventions that foster the development of resiliency with older individuals. (Springer, 2011, [www.springer.com](http://www.springer.com)).



Dr. Roberto also co-authored, *Aging Social Policies: An International Perspective*, with Dr. Robbyn Wacker (University of Northern Colorado). This textbook examines how both domestic and international policy impact the lives of the growing aging population. International comparisons shed light on the varied approaches to constructing social policy and their direct effects on the quality of life of older adults. (Sage Publications, 2011, [www.sagepub.com](http://www.sagepub.com))

### *Featured Graduate Certificate Alumnus*

Alan C. Taylor, Ph.D., a 1998 Graduate Certificate in Gerontology Alumnus, is an Assistant Professor at East Carolina University (ECU) in the Department of Child Development and Family Relations, as well as faculty member in the ECU Family and Community Services program. Previously, Dr. Taylor was on the faculty at Syracuse University. Dr. Taylor's research focuses on grandparent-grandchild relationships—specifically grandfathering, preparations for family life education and community services, and family theories and applications. He recently completed an edited book (scheduled for release in December, 2011) with Dr. Sharon Ballard entitled, *Family Life Education for Diverse Populations*.

Dr. Taylor is engaged in a variety of research projects, with several new publications forthcoming. “My colleague, Dr. James Bates (South Dakota State University), and I recently collected data from over 500 grandfathers. We are exploring what constitutes ‘grandfather involvement’ and how grandfathers are actively involved in the lives of their grandchildren. Our analysis indicates that grandfather involvement involves three distinct areas: commitment, contact, and activities... Our work will provide some much needed direction in regards to the area of grandfathering.” He involves both his graduate and undergraduate students in his research projects, with opportunities for co-presenting findings at local, regional, and national conferences.



“Getting students excited and interested about aging issues has been my ultimate objective”, noted Dr. Taylor. “My ability to teach gerontology courses at the university level has allowed me to change the attitudes and perspectives of so many undergraduate students about adult development and aging.” Dr. Taylor has received numerous awards for teaching excellence, including ECU's Department of Child Development and Family Relations Annual Outstanding Teacher Award, and Syracuse University's College for Human Development Virginia C. Simons Annual Outstanding Teacher Award. Dr. Taylor demonstrates a deep commitment to engaging students in the classroom and sparking their interest and enthusiasm for issues pertaining to late life. One student recently told him, “I had no idea learning about aging issues would be so interesting”—a common sentiment among many of his students.

Dr. Taylor highlights the mentorship he received at Virginia Tech as a formative influence on his professional development. “Drs. Karen Roberto and Rosemary Blieszner each modeled themselves as educators, teaching with passion and enthusiasm in regards to adult development and aging content when I was in their classes many years ago. They have been great examples to me and I hope I can continue to follow their lead.”

### *Center for Gerontology Fall 2011 Research Forum*



On Thursday, October 20, 2011 the Center for Gerontology welcomed Dr. Richard Winett, Heilig Meyers Professor of Psychology at Virginia Tech and faculty affiliate of the Center, as our Fall Research Forum speaker. Dr. Winett’s talk entitled, “Resistance Training and Disease Prevention and Treatment: Translating Basic and Behavioral Sciences into Practice” focused on demystifying Resistance Training (RT), providing an overview of current research, and discussing the basic principles and protocols for RT, as well as the various health benefits associated with this form of exercise. His presentation emphasized some of the common misconceptions about RT as being an extrinsic approach that involves considerable force, similar to that of weightlifting, or that it is dauntingly complicated to learn and practice. These common views often discourage middle-age and older adults from engaging in this health promoting activity, which has demonstrated positive effects on numerous health mechanisms associated with diabetes, cancer, heart disease, and musculoskeletal problems. RT has also been shown to reduce disease risk and serve as a key component of physical rehabilitation.

### *The Center Welcomes New Graduate Research Assistants for 2011-2012*

The center welcomes Ana Jaramillo, MS, Caitlin Rivers, BA, and Stefan Pasymowski, MEd, as new members of our research team this fall. Ana Jaramillo Sierra is a third-year doctoral student in the Marriage and Family Therapy program. She holds a Master of Science in Clinical Psychology from Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá and a BS in Psychology from Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá. Ana is working closely with Dr. Savla on various research projects this semester. Their current study examines the influence of childhood adversities and abuse on family closeness in adulthood. Ana’s own research interests include women’s experience and expression of anger and aggression in different relational contexts. In her free time she enjoys literature, meditation, walking, dancing, and good food.



L-R: Ana Jaramillo, Stefan Pasymowski, and Caitlin Rivers

Caitlin is pursuing her master’s degree in Public Health, with a specialization in infectious diseases. She holds a BA in Anthropology from the University of New Hampshire. At the Center she works with Dr. Roberto on several projects including studies on elder abuse, fall prevention, and cancer survivorship in late life. Caitlin enjoys reading and baking in her free time.

Stefan is a second-year doctoral student in the Marriage and Family Therapy program, and is pursuing a Graduate Certificate in Gerontology. He works primarily with Drs. Karen Roberto and Rosemary Blieszner studying changes in couple and family relationships in the context of mild cognitive impairment. His research interests include the development of treatment approaches with aging and caregiving couples, with a particular focus on couples’ adjustment to cognitive impairment in one partner.

Stefan holds a M.Ed. from the University of Oregon in Couple and Family Therapy, and a BA in Psychology from Vassar College. In his free time he enjoys swimming, hiking, and photography.

### ***Summer Research Assistant: Alie Reichling***

This summer, we were very fortunate to have Alie Reichling work with us at the Center for Gerontology. Alie is from Annandale, Virginia and graduated from Virginia Tech in Spring 2011 with bachelor degrees in Psychology and Communication. While at the Center, Alie developed a database of recent scholarly publications and policy documents for Dr. Roberto's upcoming revision of her textbook, *Community Resources for Older Adults*, and assisted Dr. Brossoie with the evaluation of Virginia's Community Living Program. Alie noted that through her work at the Center and other research labs on campus she "gained an increased understanding of the complexities of conducting research with older adults and immense amount of work involved in academic research and writing." Although unsure of what route she will pursue to work with older adults, she feels that each research experience has opened new doors and expanded her understanding of professional possibilities. Although we were sad to say goodbye at the end of the summer, we wish Alie the best in pursuing a career working with older adults.



### ***Hold the Date***

#### ***16th Annual Graduate Certificate and Awards Celebration April 11th, 2012 7-9 PM, Fralin Auditorium***

The 16th Annual Graduate Certificate and Awards Celebration will be held from 7 to 9 PM on April 11th, 2012 in the Fralin Auditorium. This year's keynote speaker will be Dr. Keith E. Whitfield, Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience at Duke University, Durham, NC. Dr. Whitfield's research focuses on individual differences in minority aging, particularly variation in cognition due to health conditions. His work has also examined how social, psychological, and cultural factors are associated with cognition and healthy aging. Watch for more information in early 2012.

### ***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, Kelly Munly, 2011 S. J. Ritchey Scholarship recipient:

"The generosity behind the S.J. Ritchey Scholarship has allowed me to attend an international conference on caregiving and disability, and to engage with the latest topics integral to my dissertation topic, Adult Foster Care. It will also provide funds for travel and recruitment costs related to data collection in 2012."

Donations can be mailed directly to the Center, or made on-line: <http://www.givingto.vt.edu/>

## *Center for Gerontology Staff*

Karen A. Roberto, Ph.D., Professor & Director  
Rosemary Blieszner, Ph.D., Alumni Distinguished Professor & Associate Director  
Tina Savla, Ph.D., Assistant Professor & Research Methodologist  
Nancy Brossoie, Ph.D., Senior Research Associate  
Marya McPherson, MS., Research Associate  
Carlene Arthur, BS, Administrative Assistant  
Ana Jaramillo, MS, Caitlin Rivers, BA, and Stefan Pasymowski, MEd, Graduate Research Assistants

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