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Senior Writing Course Opens Doors to the Past

By Amanda Kuehn



Seniors participate in a recent writing seminar at the Lafayette Community Center. Photo provided

documented the stories of seniors in a previous position and had seen how valuable that act of sharing can be. "That's how I came up with the idea," she said. "I had the seniors and we had a writing group, but they weren't documenting their life stories, they were just writing."

Neumann made a call to the MFA program at Saint Mary's in July of 2012 and explained what she was looking for in terms of instruction. Coordinator of student services Candace Eros Diaz was tickled. "One of our original goals was to do more social justice with the program," said Diaz. "It was just one of those opportunities that we couldn't pass up." Diaz recruited MFA candidate Michael Caligaris and connected him with Professor Marilyn Abildskov, who had experience with teaching writing to seniors.

"I always wanted to teach, and figured there was no better situation than this - one where both student and teacher would be learning from each other," said Caligaris. "I was so green coming in. But by the end I felt in control, had a handle on the material and was blown away by the responses I received." The first session, which Caligaris believes will be the anchor for every class he teaches in the future, consisted of roughly 10 classes offered every other week.

The second session was led by Lufti the following spring and gave the additional opportunity of attending regular "craft talks" on the Saint Mary's campus. "[The seniors] ask these really cool questions and add a really unique layer to our craft conversations," remarked Diaz. The second session also included a class blog (which can be found at <http://lafayetteseniors.wordpress.com/>) and a printed anthology for students who chose to participate. "Every year it gets better and better," said Diaz.

"The partnership is such a win-win," added Neumann. "Anytime we can partner with anyone else in the community there's a mutual benefit. It gives us a wonderful instructor and gives the students a vehicle for being involved in the community."

In addition to personal and professional development, that kind of involvement often leads to relationship. "As I got to know [the students] through their writing, I realized that all of them had gone through so many tragedies but kept on going," said Lufti. "I think they showed me the true meaning of growing old gracefully."

Roughly 50 seniors have participated in the course so far. The response has been

"Dinner hour on the day of my seventh birthday is a local legend," writes 71-year-old Janet Clark in the opening paragraph of her essay "Friends for Dinner." The first piece in a spring anthology of senior writing, Clark's essay depicts a special memory from her childhood. She worked on the story while attending "Document Your Life Story," a semester-long writing course offered through Lafayette Senior Services.

The course, which provides instruction in the craft of writing personal essays and memoir, was facilitated by Saint Mary's Master of Fine Arts graduate Yuska Lufti. "I believe that they have so much wisdom and so many life lessons to share with us," Lufti said of his students. "This wisdom and these life lessons need to be written down and documented."

"Document Your Life Story" was dreamed up by Maureen Neumann, Senior Services coordinator at Lafayette Parks and Recreation. Neumann had

overwhelmingly positive. "You feel very comfortable," said Joan Wahl Countryman. "A lot of us are a little shy about putting ourselves out there, but you have that feeling of being secure." Countryman has seen her writing improve since joining the class. "You're never too old to learn," she said. Janet Clark agreed, stating, "The more you do it the better you get."

"The participants have come into my office and sent emails of appreciation for how grateful they are for this class," said Neumann. "What I've heard frequently is that the writing that they've been led to do has been extremely cathartic. It's lifted burdens."

The next session of "Document Your Life Story" will be offered this fall. Anyone interested in participating can call Lafayette Senior Services at (925) 284-5050 for information on dates, times and class fees. Classes will take place at the Lafayette Community Center, 500 St. Mary's Rd. You can also look for details in the activity guide found at www.lafayetterec.org.

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