

# What I Know Now

## A UI cross-generational writing project gives students a priceless gift.

BY KATHRYN HOWE

**T**he letters arrived in all forms. Short stories and poems. Memoirs and bullet-pointed lists. Some came as sentence fragments, while others ran 15 pages.

Though they differed in style and length, the letters shared one unmistakable characteristic—each possessed a profoundness and a poetry refined by the wisdom of experience.

The writers, many in the twilight of their lives, spoke of lessons learned from years of joy and despair. No subject too painful or taboo, they candidly wrote about sick children and battles with cancer. They spoke of abuse suffered in their homes and the death of friends from AIDS. Of war,

gratitude, hidden blessings, and the regret that comes from too little time spent with family.

Mostly, they spoke of resiliency and love.

“You live long enough and there’s no escaping tragedy,” says UI lecturer David Gould, 92MA, who began a project this past winter to spark a conversation among his undergraduate students and senior citizens with a connection to the university community. “The depth of these letters is phenomenal. Every single one has a meaningful message to share.”

A lecturer in the UI’s leisure studies program, Gould says he became aware of an unfortunate disconnect between the generations through a journal assignment

in which he asks students to interview an older person. Repeatedly, he noticed that students struggled to pinpoint someone for the task.

This lack of contact struck him as a monumental loss. A firm believer

that life’s lessons can be told in both directions, Gould set about establishing a link between young and old. The result is called “Legacy Letters.”

Perhaps that famous quotation from Kierkegaard best describes the project’s intent: *Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards.* Gould hoped senior citizens would bestow the benefit of hindsight on students just preparing to embark on their chosen paths—and that all participants would find themselves enriched in the process.

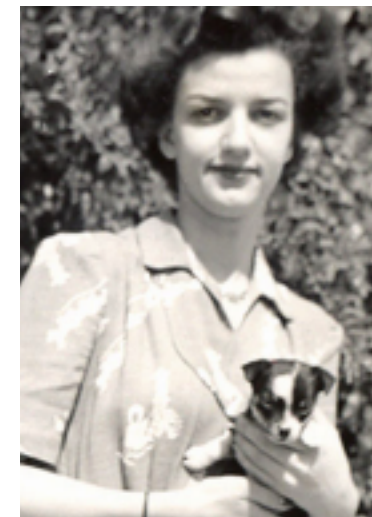
“We’re all basically on the same journey, but some of us are farther down the road,” says Gould, also coordinator of the UI interdepartmental studies program. “This was an opportunity for seniors to shout back and offer a shortcut, to point out the potholes and the views that shouldn’t be missed. To say ‘I’ve lived and this is what I can pass along to you.’”

“I sincerely believe all of us have wisdom to share. The biggest fallacy is that we think we don’t.”

In January, Gould began soliciting letters from people age 50 and older with ties to Johnson County, asking them to share what they know now that they wished they’d known in their 20s. He thought he’d get a few letters here and there peppered with solid, sage advice. In fact, what he received took him completely by surprise.

Letters poured in from across the United States and abroad, each utterly poignant and moving in its own way.

One writer charted her life by the challenges she faced—abandonment as a child, domestic abuse, breast cancer. She made a list of these events that



**“My daughter Barbara was my greatest teacher. Barbara was a Down syndrome child who came in love and remained in love all her 59 years.”**

Claire Shaw  
Iowa City

**“Love is the magic of human life... It is the single most important aspect of our earthly sojourn.”**

Louis De Grazia  
Iowa City



**“I felt that I was extremely busy and unable to afford time for a vacation.”**

Jay H. Honohan, 60JD  
Iowa City



**"...I began to lose so many friends to AIDS. One never knows the day that will put everything on hold..."**

Bruce Zehnle, 68MA  
Plainfield, New Jersey



strengthened her resolve, referring to it often when she needs reminding that she is indeed a survivor. In her Legacy Letter, she encouraged students to start their own lists for whenever they need inner strength.

"I've had some hard knocks, but you just keep trying," says Sharon Stubbs, 67BBA, of Coralville, the letter's author. "When something nasty comes along, you can look at your life credentials and say, 'I've done this before and I'll do it again.' That's important for people to know, and it makes me feel good I've offered this lesson to someone who might need it."

Another woman talked about the insight gained from raising a daughter with Down syndrome—that what appeared a tragedy on the outside turned out to be the best gift of her life. "I wanted to let people know that we all have value, however we might look," 84-year-old Claire Shaw says of her daughter, Barbara. "She didn't have those holdings that we all seem to carry with us, that prevent us from expressing what we need to say. She was so open and undaunted. She taught me to love freely all of life."

It was a lesson that many men who wrote Legacy Letters regretted learning too late. Several explained how they spent their lives chasing after jobs, power, and wealth—only to realize much later that they made the wrong investments of their time.

"This is the best and worst time for students to receive these messages," Gould says. "It's the best time because their options are open. It's the worst because they haven't crossed that bridge to believe they might encounter similar experiences over the horizon."

While Gould figured the project would prove valuable to students, he didn't quite realize how meaningful it would be to the writers, who jumped at the chance to impact a young person. One woman, who felt an enormous responsibility to share her advice, called him five days in a row to ask questions. Many seniors provided their contact information in hopes of reaching students on a more personal level. Some offered to speak in Gould's class.

As they revealed their personal stories, the letter writers also provided insight into the changes that have taken place since their days at the UI. Their accounts describe living in tin barracks and a wartime campus void of men; a time

when undergraduate girls were required to pass a swimming test to graduate or when an ivy-green Mustang cost only \$2,400.

"There's a huge value in knowing where you come from and understanding how those before you paved the way," Gould says.

So far, Gould has received more than 100 letters from people aged 50 to 93—and new submissions arrive each day. In cooperation with the Iowa City-Johnson County Senior Center, Gould turned 16 of the letters into a June exhibit at the downtown senior center. For the showing, he placed an inspirational quote or phrase from each piece on a large panel alongside a photo of the letter writer in his or her youth. Pairing these fresh faces with the wise words of their older selves created an undeniable work of art.

Gould is now developing a website where students and the public can click on such photo icons to access all the letters. He also plans to publish a coffee table-type book of images and quotes, and eventually to film some of the authors reading their words.

Such spin-offs are rewarding and interesting, but they can't beat the impact of the original Legacy Letters. At the end of last semester, Gould gathered up the letters and selected one for each of his students. He placed the letters in envelopes along with a personal note that explained the project's process and purpose.

As they read the words of people with similar personalities and senses of humor, the students discovered a common ground with the writers. Aging became less scary, the elderly more accessible. They learned that we grow older and our bodies may fail; in our hearts, though, we're still capable of cartwheels and jumping jacks. And that's quite a legacy.

Any comments about this feature? E-mail [kathryn-howe@uiowa.edu](mailto:kathryn-howe@uiowa.edu).

**YOU CAN STILL WRITE  
A LEGACY LETTER.**

Send your stories to David Gould,  
219 Macbride Hall, Iowa City, IA  
52242-1322 or e-mail  
[david-gould@uiowa.edu](mailto:david-gould@uiowa.edu).



**"Students were blocking the door to the union against ROTC recruiters and dressed as shrouds in protest of the war."**

Marian Mathews Clark, 68MA, 87MFA  
Iowa City

**"Make a list of things you have survived and keep it where you can see it often."**

Sharon Stubbs, 67BBA  
Coralville



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**"Others give meaning to our lives. Be interested in others and you will be interesting to others. Be committed to others and they will be committed to you."**

Willard "Sandy" Boyd  
UI President Emeritus



**"Read the comics every day."**

Glenn Jablonski, 66MA  
Iowa City



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**"Realistically, my body knows I can't turn a cartwheel in the yard, but my mind finds it plausible."**

Lorna Moldenhauer Cress, 56BA  
Iowa City

