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UI looks to tap wisdom of seniors

By Deanna Truman-Cook
Iowa City Press-Citizen

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Unfortunately, we can't use a crystal ball to help us see into the future. At every age, we live by the choices we make, often not knowing what bumps we will encounter until we hit them.

But what if we could learn from those who have already had similar experiences?

Could we make wiser decisions? Would the gap between generations narrow?

David Gould does not have the answers. But he does have a pretty good idea that older adults could help younger people just by sharing their life knowledge.

It's why Gould, a lecturer of the University of Iowa's leisure studies program, has teamed up with the Iowa City/Johnson County Senior Center for the Legacy Letter Project.

He's asking adults age 50 and older who have a connection to Johnson County to share stories, advice and thoughts on what they know now that they wish they would have known when they were in their 20s.

"If you look at life as a journey, I think there is value in looking at someone ahead of you saying what to avoid, what to do, what to definitely see," said Gould, 47.

All of the letters will be collected and displayed at the Senior Center during the June 1 Gallery Walk.

A few excerpts from some of the letters will be enlarged and framed.

Letters can be of any length, because Gould said he does not want people to be limited in what they say.

In fact, he encourages people to send in

Legacy Letter Project

• **What:** The University of Iowa Leisure Studies Program and the Iowa City/Johnson County Senior Center are asking people age 50 and older to send letters that contain stories, advice and other life wisdom to college students.

The letters should give insight on what they know now that they wish they would have known when they were in their 20s.

The idea of the project is to pass on knowledge and help bridge the gap between the generations.

• **Details:** Letters can be of any length.

All of the letters will be shown at the Senior Center during the June 1 Gallery Walk.

Excerpts from a few of the letters will be enlarged and framed.

Each letter needs to include contact information for the writer.

• **When:** Letters are being accepted until May 1. They can be mailed to:

David Gould
The University of Iowa
Coordinator/Interdepartmental Studies Program
Faculty/Leisure Studies Program
219 McBride Hall
Iowa City, IA 52242

Or e-mailed to: david-gould@uiowa.edu.

• **Information:** Call 319-384-3529.

stories.

From stories of losing farms during the Depression, or coping with a loss of a child or of going through a divorce, he thinks that college students will not only gain advice, but also a better understanding of what life was like decades ago.

This summer, Gould embarked on a similar project writing letters to several people such as model Carol Alt and five-time NBA Most Valuable Player Bill Russell, who one time were at the top of their fields.

Gould asked the former celebrities to share life wisdom with his students.

“No one wrote how to get rich quick,” Gould said. “They are all in hindsight, the small things that matter...”

Alt stressed the importance of balancing career and family.

“Looking back on the life I have led and the things that I have done, I realize that most of what I have done is fleeting,” she wrote.

“What I mean is: ‘Does the new generation of grads know that I was on the cover of 700 magazines? ... Do they know I was the first person to do posters and calendars?’ ... Now looking back, I see the folly, the mistake. In fact, I see the missed opportunities in my life.

“Where was I when my sister had her child? Modeling in Paris. When my grandmother died? Shooting a movie in Miami.”

UI graduate student John Mitchell will work on the project as a way to “help bridge the gap in the community between students and seniors.”

Johnson County is home to about 17,000 UI students and more than 8,300 people older than 65.

Among Iowa's 99 counties, Johnson has the eighth highest older population, according to the Johnson County Consortium on Successful Aging.

And while so much has changed, such as technology, there is still a lot that students can learn from adults aged 50 and older, said Michelle Buhman, an event organizer at the Senior Center.

“Grandparents may not know how to use a computer, but there is so much information you can learn from them,” she said.

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