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Words from the wise

Legacy letter project bridges generation gap

By **Deanna Truman-Cook**

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The concept for the Legacy Letter Project was simple: Seniors, identified as adults 50 and older, would pass on useful knowledge from their lives to college-age students by writing letters.

The University of Iowa, which is coordinating the project, along with the Iowa City/Johnson County Senior Center, sent out a call for letters in February. The response has surpassed expectations.

"They have come in from across the world," said David Gould, a lecturer of the UI's Leisure Studies Program, who is leading the project.

The letters also have been written in numerous forms.

"It has run the gamut," Gould said. "It has come in as poetry, short stories, bullet points, to actual letters."

And project organizers still are taking submissions.

The only requirement organizers ask is that submitters have a tie to the Iowa City area.

The letters will be showcased at the June 1 Gallery Walk. Excerpts from a few will be enlarged and framed.

"We want the exhibit at the Senior Center to be a big success," Gould said.

Gould also encourages personal stories.

"We all define our lives in stories," he said.

Iowa City resident Iva Sagert sent in a letter about her adopted mother who, with no education past eighth grade and no work experience, raised her and her sister by herself as a 34-year-old widow.

Legacy Letter Project

- What: The University of Iowa Leisure Studies Program and the Iowa City/Johnson County Senior Center are asking people 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 earlier. The idea of the project is to pass on knowledge and to help bridge the gap between the generations.

- Details: Letters can be of any format and length. They will be showcased at the Senior Center during the June 1 Gallery Walk. Each letter needs to include contact information for the writer.

- When: Letters are being accepted through the end of May. They can be mailed to David Gould, The University of Iowa, Coordinator/ Interdepartmental Studies Program, Faculty/Leisure Studies Program, 219 McBride Hall, Iowa City, Iowa 52242.

Letters also can be e-mailed to david-gould@uiowa.edu.

- Information: Call 384-3529.

Her mother was determined to make a living after the death of her husband. She went to beauty school and with almost no money soon started a successful beauty shop.

"I think the thing that shaped my life was acquiring parents who truly cared, and witnessing my mother's courage in facing a challenge that was so awesome," Sagert, 81, wrote in her letter.

"I like to think that she was an amazing woman way ahead of her time."

Coralville resident Susan Wakefield, 67, preferred to send in her response as a poem.

When she first heard of the project, Wakefield said she joked that her college days were much different than today and what could college students learn about dorms that once closed down at 10:30 p.m.?

But she started to think about the project more and found there was a lot she and others could pass on.

One part of her poem reads:

"My mother Helen,

"when I said I hated a 5th-grade math teacher, responded ...

"She might have reasons to be crabby. Just look hard and you can find something about her that you like.'

"I tried her advice

"and later reported

"that the teacher wasn't so bad.

"Respect for others

"and appreciating

"the worth of each person is a valuable lesson."

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