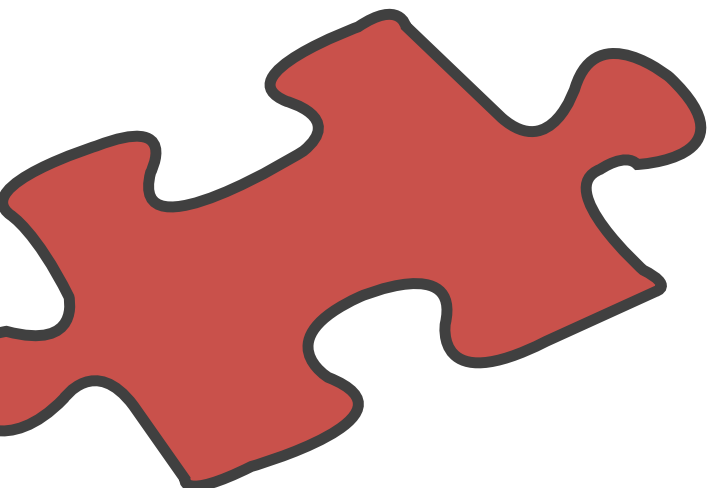
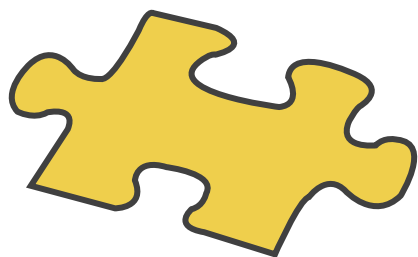




CONNECTING THROUGH THE AGES

BY CAROL CUMMINGS





WHEN STUDENTS TAKE DR. DANA BURR BRADLEY'S INTRODUCTION TO GERONTOLOGY CLASS AT WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY, THEY ARE EACH REQUIRED TO INTERVIEW AN OLDER ADULT AND PRESENT THEIR FINDINGS TO THE CLASS. FOR MANY OF THESE STUDENTS, THIS IS A SIGNIFICANT EXPERIENCE THAT HELPS THEM LINK THE THEORETICAL WITH THE PRACTICAL, AS THEY TAKE THE CONCEPT OF AGEISM AND EXPLORE THAT WITH AN OLDER ADULT.

Dr. Bradley shared the story of a football player who interviewed his grandmother, painting a vivid picture with the stories he told about her and the things he brought to share. His presentation included a poster with pictures, pieces of her jewelry, and a scarf, and Dr. Bradley described it as "vital and alive," as it poignantly displayed both the connection the student had to his grandmother and the connection she had to her community.



Dr. Dana Burr Bradley

“Eighty-five percent of my students interview a grandparent,” she explained. “This helps students develop a personal appreciation of their family history and helps them understand that the consequences of what they do as college students will affect them for the rest of their lives.”

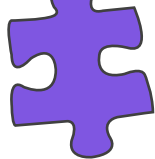
And that is what Bradley’s work is all about. As J. Clifford Todd Professor of Longevity and Healthful Living and

Director of the Center for Gerontology, Dr. Bradley serves as a self-proclaimed “incubator and spark plug for WKU as it develops programs for an aging society and spearheads ideas for healthy aging and wellness.” Dr. Bradley’s goals are to create interest in aging on campus and build on important initiatives that are already in place.

“The potential for an engaged older life depends on what you do when you’re younger,” she explained. “This work even affects undergraduates, as I encourage them to make lifestyle changes, get plenty of exercise, quit smoking, and drink more water. All of these things add up to the potential for good health, as does the way you handle stress in your daily life and find balance in all things you do.”

According to Dr. Bradley, WKU’s Center for Gerontology emphasizes the concepts of healthy communities, healthy lifestyles, and healthy aging as outlined within three strategic goals. These goals are to prepare new generations of aging advocates to work with individuals, older adults, their families, and their communities; to contribute to new knowledge on aging populations, cohorts, and communities in Kentucky and the southeast through the conduct of applied aging research; and to enhance the lives of older adults and their communities through the dissemination of community-based research, best practices, and sponsorship of programmatic activities.

Dr. Bradley says her work invites people to imagine what aging might be like, versus thinking about aging as a period of decline. “Often when we talk about aging, members of our society picture people with many chronic illnesses who are living their last years by themselves or in a nursing home,” she explained. “Not that this image is inaccurate, but for the majority of Americans, aging doesn’t have to be equated with gradual decline. The reality is that aging is a life-long process and there are many things we can do individually to ensure that our lives are healthy, active, and productive.”



WKU's interdisciplinary Gerontology minor is a program that effectively brings various disciplines together. "No one discipline owns true understanding of aging," she explained. "We better understand when we look through different lenses, and every college has people with expertise. My challenge is to get to know them better and draw on the expertise that is already in place."

Dr. Bradley, who serves as an associate professor of Public Health, has always had a keen interest in healthy aging. "My parents were forty-two when they had me, so I was the child of older parents," she explained. "My entire young life was spent with people who were considerably older than I was. To me, aging is a normal experience. Very few people have an accurate concept of aging as a fluid, permeable part of every day life."

Having lost her mother when she was six years old, Bradley was raised by her father, who was an estate planning attorney. She also spent time with her two grandmothers, both of whom lived well into their eighties. Because her father's primary source of income was from preparing wills and handling legal affairs of estates, Dr. Bradley developed an early understanding of the continuity of life and death.

One of her research interests relates to voluntarism in older adults. "As you look at the pool of volunteers, they are aging," she explained. "That is the dominant demographic in our country, and non-profit agencies have to learn how to recruit retirees and meet their needs."

Therefore, Dr. Bradley has worked to help community agencies develop programs to build relationships with and connect with the growing retiree pool. "It is bad practice to treat all volunteers the same," she continued. "We must create educational experiences for them. Retirees enjoy acquiring new knowledge and sparking their creativity, and community organizations need to find ways to stimulate that."

Dr. Bradley also serves as co-editor for the new Journal of Aging, Humanities, and the Arts, which celebrated its inaugural issue in June 2007. The official publication of the Humanities and Arts committee of the Gerontological Society of America, the goal of the journal is to foster a dialogue between the humanities and arts and the biomedical, psychological, behavioral, and social sciences to challenge stereotypes, further understanding of the aging process, and provide creative approaches to the exploration of issues pertaining to aging.

"We are very excited about this new journal," Dr. Bradley said. "It will be cutting edge and WKU honors students are currently developing a website for the journal to make it interactive, with e-news, blogs, updates, and downloads."

Dr. Bradley received her B.A. in History and Biology from the University of Rochester. She received both her M.S. and Ph.D. in Applied History and Social Science from Carnegie-Mellon University and completed the Management Development Program at Harvard University.

Dr. Bradley calls her position the best job she's ever had. "Life gives you opportunities, and it's all a matter of recognizing them and taking advantage of them," she said. "One of the most exciting things about my position is having the opportunity to listen carefully to what people say they need and then to create opportunities. I enjoy working with others who care about the aging experience. Growing old is truly the most universal, yet most diverse, of experiences." ■

