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Poems for the ages: students and elderly residents of West Wind Village

Summary:

(December 6, 2004)-By Jackie Thrasher '05, UMM News Service -- Students in Professor Argie Manolis' Fundamentals of Writing class at the University of Minnesota, Morris are taking part in two service-learning opportunities. The first, in collaboration with Professor Therese Buchmiller's Beginning Photography class, involved writing stories that accompany photographs of local farmers and their land. The stories and photos help educate about the benefits of purchasing local foods and enable students to learn about farming and basic writing and interviewing skills. Results of the student's work was showcased at the Pride of the Prairie Food Expo held this fall at UMM.

The second service learning opportunity allows students to help plan weekly activities for the elderly residents of West Wind Village. Students have to plan the activities for the appropriate competency of the resident.

"The purpose is to provide social activities between the residents and students and to help them reminisce about their lives," said Manolis.

Many of the residents suffer from different mental disorders, such as dementia. Through these activities, students help the residents remember their positive contributions to life.

Facilitators, experienced students who accompany the first-year students, write poems from the residents' words, which they read back each week to build continuity and provide in a book for the elders and their families at the end of the semester.

"The poems give kind of a sense of closure at the end," said Manolis.

During the course students write a series of reflection papers on what they've learned. They also read stories about the process of aging and dementia in preparation for their activities with the residents. At the conclusion of the course students write a paper reflecting on their experience with service learning as well as suggested improvements to the course.

The service learning opportunity is also a part of Manolis' College Writing and Introduction to Creative Writing classes. College Writing students research social issues related to aging as well as write reflective essays. Intro to Creative Writing students learn the basic techniques associated with writing poetry by writing the found poems and also write reflective pieces about their work.

This is the 5th consecutive year for the service learning course. Manolis has given six presentations at national conferences about her work with service learning. A researcher from Australia has also contacted Manolis about service learning in hopes to create the same sort of program in his country. The researcher has also visited the University in order to gain a better perspective of the project.

“I feel really proud of it—it’s getting recognition beyond the University,” said Manolis.

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