



Nurses Improving Care for Healthsystem Elders

A NICHE SHOWCASE STORY

# FOCUS ON:

## REMINISCENCES OF THINGS PAST

~ Innovative Intergenerational Project Builds Skills; Supports Elders ~

### Creating A Brighter Present For Hospitalized Seniors & Young Nurses In Training

The annual conference of NICHE (Nurses Improving Care for Healthsystem Elders) brings together hundreds of nurses, hospital administrators, educators and other healthcare professionals whose shared passion and purpose is to improve the quality of care for hospitalized older adults.

One of this year's most passionate participants was Peg Gallagher, EdD, RN CNE, an associate professor at Chicago's St. Xavier University School of Nursing, who, along with her colleague, sociology professor Kate Carey, PhD, won a NICHE conference award for their innovative research on the value of reminiscing in shaping attitudes of nursing students and seniors. "Our selection committee was immediately impressed by the promise and potential impact of this research that fit so perfectly with this year's conference theme – **Collaborate! Interdisciplinary Paths to Improved Geriatric Care,**" notes NICHE practice director Marie Boltz, PhD, RN, GNP-BC.

"NICHE is known for advancing unique and forward-thinking elder care," says Peg Gallagher. "And for those of us involved in creative geriatric research, the NICHE conference is fertile soil for new ideas and innovation." Naturally, the researchers were delighted when invited to present their project, *"Reminiscing: The Impact on Diverse*

*Elders and the Students Who Listen,"* which had evolved from Dr. Gallagher's experiences and observations as a nurse educator specializing in gerontology.

"Many nursing students have only limited experience with older people or encounter only frail elderly in advanced stages of illness," Dr. Gallagher explains. "They frequently express fears and discomfort about working with older patients. And yet the reality is that 90% of our students will be caring for elders when they graduate."

Three years ago, Dr. Gallagher initiated an intergenerational project aimed at changing students' negative perceptions and debunking stereotypes. Dr. Gallagher structured her program to give students an opportunity to meet seniors who were not acutely ill. They engaged in open-ended conversations ranging beyond the usual health topics concerning specific ailments. Reminiscing, which is an important psychological component of aging, facilitated these conversations.

The first year, Dr. Gallagher paired 25 students and seniors. The response from both exceeded expectations. "Everyone was so excited by it," says Dr. Gallagher. "The elders asked when the students were coming back; the students wanted to go back." Recognizing the need to better characterize these interactions, Dr. Gallagher teamed up with Dr. Carey.

*Teaching students that reminiscing is a therapeutic tool useful throughout their nursing careers is an important component of the project. "If a patient is stressed or upset, the students know that engaging the patient in storytelling can both calm the person and nurture a sense of trust and understanding," says Dr. Carey. "For example, in patients with cognitive decline, reminiscing has tremendous value as it allows them to focus on events in the distant past, which are easier to recall."*

The researchers then matched up 40 students and seniors in different settings. The students conversed with seniors participating in St. Xavier's continuing education program, at a local senior center and in an assisted living facility. Using newly honed reminiscing skills, the students engaged the seniors by asking them to share stories about their lives, family and work and the people and places that held great value for them.

Although nursing student Nicole Powszok, 21, has a great relationship with her grandparents, she was initially afraid that "I would have a mean person who wouldn't want to talk with me or tell me anything, or I'd be with someone who'd want to tell me absolutely every detail about their life." Nicole met with "G.G.," an animated and lively woman just shy of her 88th birthday. For 90 minutes, they talked about G.G.'s life in Germany before the war and about coming to the U.S. as a young woman, and of being a stay-at-home mom of five kids.

At the end of the visit, G.G. told Nicole that she was very proud of her life's accomplishment and happy with the life she lived. "Her words have stuck with me since that day," says Nicole, "because I think we all forget about the simple things in life -- and when our time comes, I hope we all feel as she does."

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The St. Xavier study relates to previous work on reminiscence therapy conducted by Juliette Shellman, PhD, APRN-BC, who was selected as a 2004-06 NYU John A. Hartford "Building Academic Geriatric Nursing Capacity" postdoctoral fellow. Her research involved applying integrative reminiscence to decrease depression in older African Americans. Dr. Shellman's pilot study found a significant decrease in depressive symptoms compared to a control group and a group receiving attention training.

"Reminiscing with our elder patients is an important intervention we as nurses should use," says Nicole. "It's hard because we don't have much time with the patient ratio we're given, but I think it's important. We have to always remember they have a story, and our attention to it helps them feel like they matter, that they are loved and cared for."

Moving forward, the researchers hope to show that this intergenerational interaction will not only change attitudes, it will also influence the students' career choices. "We're looking to measure outcomes, to understand if this type of interaction may encourage students to pursue gerontology," says Dr. Gallagher. "We'll track what specialty our students say they want to pursue prior to participating in an intergenerational session and follow how the experience influences their ultimate career choice." The bottom line, says Dr. Gallagher, who has been teaching gerontology to nursing students for more than 30 years, is pragmatic and simple: "You've got to get them while they're young," she says.

## SNAPSHOT OF NICHE

NICHE (Nurses Improving Care for Healthsystem Elders) is a multifaceted program specifically designed to improve the quality of care for hospitalized older adults by increasing awareness of geriatric issues, improving staff competence in geriatric care and supporting the implementation of hospital geriatrics protocols. NICHE's mission is to engage, encourage and inspire nurses and other healthcare practitioners to identify gaps and needs in geriatric care and implement solutions to close those gaps. NICHE provides an extensive array of resources and tools that guide, support and educate healthcare professionals and facilities throughout the process of achieving NICHE designation.

Since its launch in 1992, NICHE has evolved into a self-sustaining program based at the Hartford Institute for Geriatric Nursing at New York University College of Nursing. As of November 2010, there are 300 NICHE-designated hospitals in the U.S. and Canada.

# Reminiscing Tips From Drs. Peg Gallagher and Kate Carey

## **Reminiscing Starters**

- Tell me about your childhood (i.e. hometown, parents, siblings, school, etc.).
- Tell me about your family life (spouse, children, jobs/volunteering, holidays, etc.).
- How did (choose an event in history, like WW1, civil rights movement, computer age, etc.) influence you or your family?

## **General Tips to Facilitate Reminiscing**

- Be a good listener: listen actively; maintain eye contact; do not interrupt or correct; be patient; allow adequate time.
- Respond in a positive manner—make comments to encourage the elder to continue.
- Encourage memories from different stages (i.e., what did you do for fun when you were a teenager? What was the living through the war like for you?).
- Be patient with repetition.
- Use props to prompt recollections (i.e., pictures from the past, memorabilia, music).
- Keep the conversation focused on the person reminiscing, but do share some of your memories on the topic if they relate to topic being discussed.
- Use open-ended questions. (Tell me about your first job. Tell me about your wedding day. What were your favorite foods as a child?).
- In addition, you can use props (pictures, mementos, etc.) or materials like poems or Reminisce Magazine [www.reminisce.com](http://www.reminisce.com) to initiate or facilitate discussion.

## **Helping Children Reminisce with Grandparents**

- Children need to be prepared for the interview. Using the guidelines above (be patient, listen carefully, etc.) family/ teachers must appropriately prepare the children.
- Starting with more structure is helpful. For example, letting the children use a picture of the upcoming holiday or of their school, will encourage memories for the elder.
- Always be mindful of the child's safety. Elders with Alzheimer's disease or other cognitive impairment can sometimes lash out verbally or physically. If your parent or grandparent is prone to these episodes, it's best not to engage young children in the conversations.