

Winter 2007

Helping Seniors Stay Independent

Mardi Mileham
Linfield College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/linfield_magazine

Recommended Citation

Mileham, Mardi (2007) "Helping Seniors Stay Independent," *Linfield Magazine*: Vol. 3 : No. 3 , Article 11.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/linfield_magazine/vol3/iss3/11

This article is brought to you for free via open access, courtesy of DigitalCommons@Linfield. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@linfield.edu.

Helping seniors stay independent

Linfield nursing students are pinning together a safety net for some senior citizens in East Multnomah County.

The Senior Safety Pin Project, launched with a \$26,000 United Way innovation grant to the Linfield-Good Samaritan School of Nursing, East County One Stop and Human Solutions Inc., is linking senior citizens with Linfield nursing students who, in turn, connect them with services that help them remain independent.

The seniors' needs vary. Many have chronic diseases such as diabetes, Alzheimer's or congestive heart failure; others need relatively simple intervention to make their homes safer.

"I keep telling the students that growing old is really tough in our society," said Karen Hubbard, an assistant professor of nursing who is also the clinical instructor for the Safety Pin Project. "Making sure that elders are safe, engaged and socially active is one of the small things that doesn't require a prescription or insurance reimbursement."

The Safety Pin Project is incorporated into the nursing curriculum and each student is assigned to work with three or four seniors. The students analyze the clients' medications, assess the safety of their homes and identify resources such as transportation to doctors' appointments and grocery stores to help the seniors remain independent.

Individuals with the greatest need are targeted for the project, and soon realize they are doing something useful as well as receiving help.

"Once they understand that they will help the students with their education by giving them hands-on experience, the seniors enroll," Hubbard said. "It's a triple win. It's a win for the community because it's a resource they don't have to fund. The students win because the seniors are so gracious in sharing their time and their concerns. The elders win because they are sharing the reality of their own health concerns and the challenges they face, and they are decreasing their social isolation."

The students are doing an excellent job of interacting with the clients, Hubbard noted, and have done far more than expected.

When Maria, a native of Italy, was struggling to



Leigh Clayton '07 talks to a senior citizen about the various medications she takes. Clayton was one of 21 Linfield nursing students who worked with over 50 seniors in the Senior Safety Pin Project as part of their clinical work in the nursing curriculum.

control her diabetes, Amy Bruninga '07 analyzed her medications and blood sugar levels, and after consulting with Maria's pharmacist, suggested a change in the timing of her medication. That, coupled with some adjustments in her diet, has helped Maria manage her symptoms and regain energy. Bruninga took it one step further: She did some research and ordered diabetic cookbooks - in Italian and English - to help Maria cook her native foods using less sugar.

Another client who was hospitalized with pneumonia could not receive housekeeping services until his mobile home was cleaned. The student recruited helpers - including his caseworker and a fellow student - and spent a day making it safe and healthy for convalescence.

For Jaime Warren '07, much of the work is troubleshooting. Her first task is to get the clients to trust her and establish personal connections.

"If our goal is to keep these individuals in their homes, then we need to figure out what will make their lives better," she said. "But it's also about respect. Clients want to be respected for what they have done in their lives and how capable they are. It's important that older people be respected. They often have a rich and amazing history."

One of the biggest challenges for many seniors is loneliness and isolation because family members often live far away.

"This program gives them a connection," Warren said. "It involves people who care and are willing to put time into this. That's a hopeful thing, and people need that. You don't know whose life you are saving or changing."

- Mardi Mileham