



News Release

Contact:
Jason Parent
Development and
College Relations Office
33 Edgemont Drive
Presque Isle, ME 04769
Phone: (207) 768-2808
Fax: (207) 768-2813
jparent@nmcc.edu

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NMCC nursing students and faculty to host “Well-Elder Tea”

Aroostook County - The success of a program that connects first-year nursing students at Northern Maine Community College with seniors living in communities throughout the region will be celebrated at an afternoon tea Thursday, November 29, on the NMCC campus.

The Well Elder program has been a part of the nursing curriculum at NMCC for more than 10 years. It pairs members of the first year nursing class with healthy senior citizens who volunteer to allow students into their homes throughout the semester to practice their assessment techniques.

“The focus of our first semester students is the adult and older adult,” said Betty Kent-Conant, nursing and allied health department chair. “The clinical experience for these students is scheduled in long-term care facilities and nursing homes. However, residents in these type of facilities represent only about five percent of the total elder population, so this is a wonderful chance for students to observe and experience ‘normal’ aging in the individual’s own environment.”

When visiting their “well elders” NMCC student nurses take vital signs and review medications, home safety and general health lifestyles. Students also gain valuable experience practicing their interview and listening skills.

“It has been very enlightening,” said nursing student Laurie Hartley of Caribou about the interactions with her well elder. “I’ve learned a great deal about the elderly population and their needs and concerns when it comes to their overall wellbeing. It will help me a lot when I work with the elderly population as a future nurse. I will better understand how to work with and communicate with patients in this age group. It really was a valuable experience.”

What Hartley and her fellow classmates will take from the experience mirrors what faculty in the nursing and allied health department at NMCC envisioned when they introduced the well elder program.

“As faculty, we truly want to instill a sense of appreciation and respect for the well elders,” said Daryl Boucher, first year nursing student coordinator. “This project allows the students to not only understand the importance of assessment, communication or history gathering, it allows them to gain a new appreciation of all the accomplishments and contributions made by the older generation.”

For one of Boucher’s students, Charles Ouellette of Van Buren, the well elder experience has had additional value added. His well elder, Irena Cyr – also of Van Buren, is a retired registered nursing of 50 years who has worked in hospitals and nursing homes on both sides of the border in the St. John Valley. Cyr, it turned out, had worked side-by-side with Ouellette’s grandmother for more than a decade, when both worked as RNs at Borderview Manor Nursing Home in Van Buren.

“It was very interesting having Charles visit and having him share with me what nursing students are learning today,” said Cyr. “When I shared with him how different things were in the 1940s and 50s when I started my career, he couldn’t believe how it has changed. I loved nursing and, most of all, the part of it that involved communicating with the patients. I stressed with Charles the importance of that interaction between the nurse and patient.”

It was a message that Ouellette took to heart as he looks forward to graduating and entering the profession himself in the spring of 2009.

“I had a particularly wonderful time working with my well elder. This was a real life experience that provided the opportunity to interact one-on-one with someone in an effort to assess what, overall, makes them a healthy person,” said Ouellette. “I also had the benefit of getting a bit of a history lesson about the profession, which I found most fascinating of all.”

For student Kate Dunleavy of Limestone, the well elder program afforded the opportunity to appreciate how different lifestyles and environmental surroundings impact an individual’s overall health. Dunleavy was amazed at the difference between the health of her octogenarian well elder and individuals of similar age in long term care facilities whom she has come to know through another component of her nursing education program. “Just seeing the difference makes me aware of how important the choices we make in terms of how we take care of ourselves are,” said Dunleavy.

A total of 44 students enrolled in the first year nursing class on the Presque Isle campus and an additional 14 students participating in the NMCC nursing program offered at a distance in Calais on the Washington County Community College campus are currently engaged in the well elder program.

The well elder tea will bring together, for the first time, all of the students and their senior volunteers. The event will be held on the Thursday, November 29, in the Edmunds Conference Center at 2:00 p.m.

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