

11-30-2004

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Seligman, Alyson, "Press release : 2004 : 11 : 30 : Social Work Students Learn Senior Life Stories" (2004). *USFSP News and Press Releases*. 190.

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Social Work Students Learn Senior Life Stories

By: [Alyson Seligman](#)

November 30, 2004 9:50AM EST

Assistant Professor Susan Allen, PhD, thought students enrolled in her Behavior and the Social Environment course should do more than discuss people and their behaviors – she required students to interview older adults and write their life review.

"This project allowed students to look at the different layers of a person and the environment and systems that impact them," said Allen, one of two full-time professors in the School of Social Work. "This prepares students to do assessments and gives them background information before doing field work for agencies."

Allen coordinated this project with Westminster Palms Retirement Community, and solicited volunteers. Students paired up with residents at a breakfast meeting and met with them throughout the semester to chronicle their life experiences and accomplishments.

Social Work senior, Jason Smith, said, "This gave me the chance to go outside my comfort zone and meet someone new that I didn't have preconceived notions about." Allen said that was her purpose. She said that in the social work field you must be able to work effectively with people of different backgrounds and this project is a step in learning how to do that.

"In Social Work we try to give students exposure to all types of people, especially older adults because they are such a rapidly growing population. We want to give students exposure and positive experiences with this segment of society," Allen said.

Smith agreed that this experience did just that. "This project really dispelled a lot of myths about older adults," said Smith, who wrote his life review about a 75-year old male resident at Westminster. "I was impressed with their wisdom and how they applied it to their lives."

Behavior and Social Environment is a required course for Social Work and ISS majors. Social Work students take three semesters of core coursework starting the second semester of their junior year.

Although this assignment was a learning experience for the students, Allen said it also is a way to give back to our older adults. The students plan to visit Westminster in January to present the residents with a copy of their life review that they can hopefully share with their family and friends.

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