Geriatrics Center social worker helps group members find silver lining

By Chelsea Morrison
University Record Intern

Independent and mobile seniors commute to Silver Club Programs located at the Turner Senior Resource Center to enrich their lives with everything from exercise to therapy and gaming sessions. “They’re able to express themselves here without anxiety,” says Laura Rice-Oeschger, a geriatric clinical social worker at the UMHS Geriatrics Center.

Upon receiving her master’s degree from the School of Social Work in 1997, Rice-Oeschger began working at the UMHS Geriatrics Center. The clinic worked hard to secure funds for the Silver Club: a day program designed for adults with memory loss. “It was the first of its kind in Ann Arbor and continues to be a creative space dedicated to fun discussion and activities that are adult focused,” Rice-Oeschger says.

Twelve years later the Silver Club is thriving. Thursdays feature an intimate and confidential group support seminar for adults living with memory loss called Coffeehouse in the mornings and a Mind Works-Brain Gaming Program in the afternoon. Older adults of varying ages and backgrounds congregate with the collective goal of mental stimulation. All areas of cognition are explored including word assimilation games as well as general recollection of the past. For an optional homework assignment, a task assigned the participants might be to list all the presidents who have served during their lifetime and the impact it may have had on their lives.

“It’s not about competing or even finding the right answer. It is the process that matters, working towards an answer. To experience cognitive gains, it’s important for our brains to get cognitive exercise,” Rice-Oeschger says.

After a small hiatus from U-M to work at the Alzheimer’s Association of Los Angeles, Rice-Oeschger returned to the Silver Club in 2004. When describing her work, Rice-Oeschger says it’s hard to contain her excitement. “Although I facilitate the sessions, I learn so much more from them,” she says.

Rice-Oeschger constantly discovers new outlets for learning. This year she will study under Jon Kabat-Zinn, the famed founding director of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, a meditation process that helps people cope with stress, anxiety, pain and illness. The process is practiced at more than 200 medical centers worldwide.
“I try to meditate daily and it has really helped me find clarity in my life,” Rice-Oeschger says. “People with memory loss are forced to live in the moment. Incorporating aspects of Kabat-Zinn’s Mindfulness philosophy into daily life helps with that.”
On top of meditation, Rice-Oeschger also uses her lifelong interest in music to wind down after a long day of work. She is a trained musician and songwriter, focused in piano and voice. Although there hasn’t been extra time lately to perform, Rice-Oeschger and her husband, a local artist and toy designer, frequently improvise in the basement for their two young daughters.
“The band has yet to make its official debut but we rock the basement and entertain our children and friends,” she says.

University Record
February 22, 2010