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Community-based education provides a learning alternative.

Killacky: Education and the elderly

Education and the elderly

By Jim Killacky

University for Man serves the Manhattan, Kan. community of some 47,000 which includes the student population of Kansas State University. Since its founding in 1968, UFM has grown from a small campus-based free university to a complex organization with the following major components:

1) **The Campus-Community Program** offers approximately 250 course offerings three times per year, and some 12,000 participants engage in these learning experiences. Courses are led by volunteers; they are free from grades, tuition, credit or exams, and fall into the general areas of crafts, fine arts, skills, foods, appropriate technology, environment, self, play, and community. In addition, the Campus-Community program sponsors a variety of other projects such as evening child care, community gardens, a speaker series, workshops and conferences. In the past it was a catalyst for a successful food co-op, a crisis center, a women's center and a number of other community programs. Participants in these courses and other projects are about evenly divided between the campus and community and include a significant number of senior citizens.

2) **The Outreach Program** has over the past six years been instrumental in the effective establishment of free university/community education programs in over 35 locations in Kansas. Most of these programs are in smaller more rural places where there is little or no form of

community-based or adult education available. The response to this process has been significant and was highlighted in the spring of 1979 with the passage of the Community Resource Act (CRA) in the Kansas Legislature. The CRA provides small amounts of **start-up** funds for community groups (such as Senior Centers) to establish their own community resource programs. The importance of this legislation was that the time from introduction to final appropriation was a nearly unprecedented brief 10 weeks. During the 1978-79 year, there were an estimated 32,000 participants in programs across the state of Kansas. The Outreach Program is currently working with groups in four other states on the dissemination of this rural community education model.

In its 12-year history UFM, as an organization, has been keenly aware of both the value and the obligation to involve people who are elderly fully in our programs. Older people serve on the staff; UFM also works very closely with service and planning agencies for the aged to insure that aging needs, issues and desires are addressed in programmatic efforts.

Method

This paper draws primarily from in-depth interviews with eight people who are closely associated with University for Man and its Outreach effort.³ These individuals are agency heads, course leaders, project directors or course takers. The majority of those interviewed are elderly. The interviews, which were conducted in early 1980, were not scientifically structured research-type meetings. Rather, each session, lasting an average of two hours, began with a question on the interviewees' perceptions of community-based education and the elderly and followed in a free-flowing discussion format thereafter.

Results

Joe de la Torre is the Director of the Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) in Manhattan and cautions that UFM should not identify specific courses for the "elderly." To pigeonhole older people perpetuates ageism. We must, he argues, recognize that older people do not want to be closeted with their peers all of the time, but do want and need to mix with other age groups in the community. Bert Franklin, a retired career diplomat, professor and longtime Yoga teacher for UFM echoes this sentiment and suggests that UFM's (and therefore community-based education's) greatest asset is that it provides a unique mechanism to tap the wisdom of the elderly for sharing with others of all ages. It provides many members of the elderly population a program around which they can order their lives and take a major step out of the isolation which can be a critical issue for many of them. Franklin continues, "many older people are tired of reading magazines and want to be somebody, whether as a student or teacher. The most satisfying courses I teach are those for older people, because they are more highly motivated and less distracted by other demands on their time." This sentiment was echoed by a very old person in one western Kansas community who noted that "this community education is good because it gets all ages working together, and for those of us who do not belong to a bunch of clubs and organizations or do not believe in that sort of thing, then community education fills an important gap in our lives."

Another perspective on the relationship between community based education and the elderly comes from

Helen Hanson. She lives in the small town of Olsburg (population 169) to which she retired a few years ago after 33 years as a teacher in a major city. In Olsburg, about the time Helen moved in with her retired widowed sister, a group of people were forming a community-based education program with the assistance of the UFM Outreach staff. Helen viewed the development of a free university community education program in her town as an excellent means for her reintroduction to the community in which she grew up. Each term (fall, spring, and summer) this local program offers between 15 and 25 courses on a wide range of issues. Helen and her sister led a History of the Bible course in their home, and it met on several occasions for about one and one-half hours. Coffee, tea and cake were served afterwards, so that the meeting served not only an education function but provided an important series of social interactions as well. This retired teacher took another course in blacksmithing—so that she could learn how to fix her grinder. Through these and many other unusual combinations of subjects and students, older people are getting to know younger folks; skills are being shared and learned; and the segregation of senior citizens, so tragically prevalent in our country today, is slowly declining. Helen Hanson and her sister Vera do not accept the notion that their small town is dying. They argue, with knowledge, authority and conviction, that the town is very much alive and well, and that their community-based education program is a major contributing factor. "Perhaps the most important contribution of the program," they conclude, "is that as a result of the interaction of all classes and ages with one another **people hereabouts are now showing more concern for each other as human beings.**"

Down the street in another house from which there comes an always warm welcome live Gerry and Lois Westling. Gerry recently retired as a rural mail carrier. Lois is the local postmaster. Both have been active in the community education program since its inception in 1977. Their experience brings into focus another important phase of this concept of community education. Gerry and Lois have always been interested in local history, and in one of the early series of courses they convened a meeting on this topic. As an added, and indeed unique touch, the panel of five "teachers" were all over 80 years of age. Plans to hold the first session in their livingroom were dropped when they realized the degree of interest they had aroused. On a cold winter Sunday afternoon, 57 people showed up at the local school to hear what these senior members of this community of 169 had to say.

The results of and response to that "course" were phenomenal. First, the panelists were elated by the opportunity to share so much of their living past with other community members. Second, community members were hungry for that type of knowledge. Each of the panelists and many others have been interviewed at length; old records/papers/archives have been brushed off and read—all pointing towards the publication of a book on the history of Olsburg in conjunction with the community's centennial celebration in 1980. The beauty of this venture is that it provides local elders with a superb opportunity to share their past knowledge and experience while simultaneously drawing people together around common interests who otherwise would have lacked access to one another. The entire preparation of a book (with the exception of printing) is being completed as a com-

mentary project. Gerry Westling notes, "if that class had not taken place, then we might only not be engaged in this project, but we might not have had a centennial celebration. Now the whole town is pulling together, as we expect around 2,000 folks here on the big day, including the Governor. Olsburg, Kansas is very much alive and well."

Pat Embers and Barb Nelson who are co-coordinators of the Olsburg project note that such efforts make their lives more affable. They and their young families moved to Olsburg over the past six years. Townspeople, especially older citizens, appreciate their efforts to facilitate and assist in the development of such courses and related events even when they choose not to participate in each event. Pat and Barb contend that the barriers between age groups are disappearing and that, in addition to learning, the greatest reward has been increased social interaction formed around common interests and mutual concerns rather than age or socio-economic status. In an era of decreasing material resources, coupled with a growing need for greater personal and social interdependence for survival, such trends may become a more and more critical facet of social existence in the coming years.

Discussion

These and activities like them are common to community-based free university projects across Kansas. In small rural places where schools are closed due to unification, where there is no passenger railroad, doctor, cinema or theatre, such projects provide a means of filling the void created by such absences. There are scores of anecdotes about the involvement of the elderly in community-based education such as the free university model. Of course, not all persons over 55 years of age in every community desire high levels of involvement in such projects. Many older people choose to spend their time otherwise, and often do so very rewardingly. However, there are in Kansas and elsewhere, thousands of people over 55 who are gifted, talented, eager to learn and to share and who sadly are forgotten or neglected. The vision of community-based education is that it provides a forum which can:

- a) facilitate elderly participation in non-threatening learning and social environments;
- b) encourage community awareness of the vast reservoir of knowledge and talent which is found in its elderly population;
- c) provide elderly people an opportunity to take important leader and advisory roles in community-wide projects;
- d) provide a mechanism to utilize and share that knowledge and talent;
- e) offer an opportunity to break down segregation and ageism which often exists with respect to older citizens;
- f) provide the younger members of a community with opportunities for learning from their elders which are not available through public means;
- g) provide creative and innovative programmatic opportunities for senior centers, nutrition sites and other places used by the elderly.

Such activities can be conceptualized, designed and implemented on a very cost-effective basis. The Olsburg, Kansas budget is less than \$400.00 per year, and on a statewide basis in Kansas, the per capita cost of par-

participation is under \$8 per year. As stated by Sue Maes in response to the question "Why does the UFM model work?", "I think it is because we do not go out and build a large institution from bricks and mortar, hire expensive instructors and charge large fees; rather we work **with** the people in a town, identify community needs and interests, and create networks for people to learn." The role of the elderly in this process as teachers, learners, organizers and followers cannot be overemphasized.

Conclusion

In a recent visit with UFM staffers, Gray Panther Leader Maggie Kuhn noted that "by emphasizing the problems of the young and old, the confluence of liberating forces can effect social change. Age is a universalizing experience and it should be shared and then together we can change the world."⁴ Another saying, from a source unknown to this author, notes, "Ours will be a great society when the dreams of the old are valued as the visions of the young."

This paper has sought to demonstrate through community-based education, a confluence of old and young energies, talents and skills can take place and change the

world. And if this is overly ambitious, one may conclude that the implementation of a community-based education program will at least provide the elderly in your community the opportunity of a better place in which to live.

FOOTNOTES

Lichtman, Jane. **Bring Your Own Bag: A Report on Free Universities**. Washington, D.C., AAHE, 1973.

Rippetoe, Joseph. "University for Man 1976: A Study of Free University Participation." **Social Development Issues**, Vol. 1, No. 3, Winter 1977-78, pp. 1-12.

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