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EXPLORATIONS **IN AGING**

The SU Aging Studies Institute takes a multidisciplinary approach to the ever-evolving issues confronting older citizens

| BY AMY SPEACH



Sociology professor Janet Wilmoth (above, far left) is director of the Aging Studies Institute, which comprises more than 40 faculty affiliates from across disciplines. Among them are Alejandro Garcia, the Jocelyn Falk Professor of Social Work (above, left) and Merrill Silverstein, the Marjorie Cantor Professor in Aging.

WITH AGING POPULATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES AND around the world larger than ever, policy makers and practitioners across disciplines face an evolving set of concerns. What are the social, cultural, health, and economic implications of this demographic shift, and how will they be addressed? How does the aging experience vary by race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual orientation? Are people living longer and in better health, or are those extra years just years of disability? In what ways are younger and older generations important to one another and interdependent?

The Syracuse University Aging Studies Institute (ASI) welcomes opportunities to explore and answer such questions, bringing together expert faculty who team up to develop insightful and practical solutions through multidisciplinary research, education, and outreach. A collaborative initiative of the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs and the David B. Falk College of Sport and Human Dynamics, the ASI comprises more than 40 faculty affiliates from a dozen departments. Established in 2011 and housed in Lyman Hall, it builds on the work and reputation of the University's Gerontology Center, which was founded in 1972 as one of the nation's first programs specifically targeted at researching aging issues.

The institute provides education and training to undergraduates through a minor in gerontology, to graduate students through courses and assistantships, and to

faculty through its seminars, conferences, and summer workshops. Its outreach activities include disseminating research findings, training gerontology educators, and working with age-related nonprofit organizations. "At the ASI, we use the term 'aging' very broadly," says sociology professor Janet Wilmoth, the institute's director. "We're not just studying 'old folks.' We're interested in aging across the whole life course."

In June, the ASI hosted an international conference on aging families, highlighting the contributions of older citizens. It drew to campus more than 120 people representing 21 countries and featuring some 75 presentations of scholarly research. The biggest event organized by the institute since its establishment, the conference helped solidify ASI's reputation as a national and international leader on aging studies. Wilmoth is confident the institute will continue to be recognized

for its outstanding scholarship. "As director, I'm working to sustain our areas of traditional strength, while also trying to cultivate new areas of expertise," she says. "It's exciting to see people from disciplines that do not typically think about these sorts of issues increasingly around the table with each other, talking about the possibilities in terms of their own research and in terms of training students."

According to social work professor Eric Kingson, who received the 2015 Donald P. Kent Award from The Gerontological Society of America for exemplary teaching, service, and interpretation of gerontology to society, the University has long had "a great group of people" working in the field of aging. "The institute helps recognize and formalize what already existed, increases its reach, and creates a certain synergy for increased contributions to the field," he says. "It's extremely important, and I'm proud to be a part of it."

A representative look at the diverse work of faculty affiliated with the ASI follows.



Contemporary Grandmothers

SOCIOLOGY PROFESSOR AND DEPARTMENT CHAIR MADONNA HARRINGTON Meyer, former director of SU's Gerontology Center, focuses her research on aging, gender, and social policy. Her book, *Grandmothers at Work: Juggling Families and Jobs* (NYU Press, 2014), examines the experiences of the growing number of grandmothers who are both actively employed and significantly contributing to caring for their grandchildren. Harrington Meyer spoke with *Syracuse University Magazine* about the book, which was recognized with the 2014 Richard Kalish Innovative Publication Award from The Gerontological Society of America.



How did your interest in this topic come about?

The early part of my career focused mostly on policy. I was mainly doing work on Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid. But during the last eight years, I've become obsessed with grandmothers! People have this image that grandma is retired, and maybe wearing an apron with a rolling pin in her hand. And that's not really what most grandmothers are doing. The proportion of women in their 50s and 60s who are employed is the highest it's ever been. And by age 50, half of all American women are grandmothers. As a country,

we don't have many federal policies that help working families. So who is to help families juggle work and family? Often a grandmother, who may also be juggling work and family. That's what this book is about. I analyzed a national data set, the Health and Retirement Survey 2010, and I interviewed 48 working grandmothers.

What did your research reveal?

The book starts with a chapter called "Joy." It may be the happiest chapter ever written in sociology, about the incredible joy the grandmothers I interviewed reported when caring for their grandchildren. But then the story grows more difficult. The next chapters talk about how intensive caring for grandchildren can be for many working grandmothers. Many were changing their work hours and using sick days and paid time off to take care of grandchildren. A lot of the grandmothers were providing a great deal of financial subsidization for younger generations, which sometimes meant going into debt. And the health implications were mixed.

Some reported that they were more active and careful about their health, feeling energized by caring for grandchildren, while others were exhausted by it. One woman said her best friend was her bed.

What impact do you hope your work will have?

As researchers, we always hope other scholars will find our work useful in broadening their understandings, and that they might assign it to their students. Beyond that, there's the hope that our work will impact public policy. If we're concerned about working grandmothers, particularly those who are physically and financially depleted, the best way to help them may be to provide their adult children with better resources, so they don't have so much difficulty juggling their own jobs and children. Federally guaranteed paid vacation, sick days, and parental leaves, for example, might help relieve pressure on parents, and therefore, on many working grandmothers.

Your next book is about grandparents who care for children with disabilities. Could you say something about the relationship between the work of the Aging Studies Institute and the field of disability studies?

I think it is a priority for the ASI to expand the sorts of research and projects we're working on that involve disability, and I'm very happy for this next book to play a part. All of us share a concern and a commitment about inclusivity, and that can take a lot of different forms. The old-fashioned way to think about disability was to "fix" the person with the disability. The way to think about disability now is to fix the environment to accommodate all of us. And that's a much more beneficial and fruitful way of thinking.



ASI's programs provide a multidisciplinary perspective on aging issues for both graduate and undergraduate students. Pictured are Rebecca Wang, a doctoral student in sociology, with Jake Pickard, a first-year student in the College of Arts and Sciences.



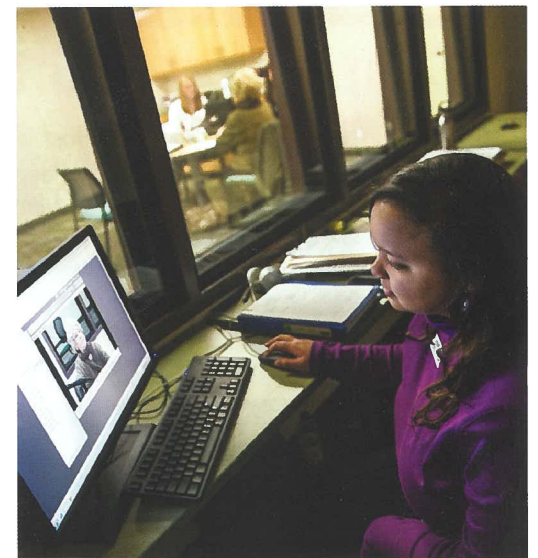
Professor Merril Silverstein confers with Linda Kridahl, a visiting scholar from Stockholm University in Sweden.

Early Help for Age-Related Hearing Loss

KAREN DOHERTY IS A COMMUNICATION SCIENCES AND DISORDERS PROFESSOR and department chair in the College of Arts and Sciences whose current research examines the early stages of age-related hearing loss, focusing on people in their mid-40s through early 60s. She explains that the problem with age-related hearing loss, or presbycusis, is it happens so gradually that people are often unaware it's creating communication problems for them. "It's easy to not recognize gradual hearing loss as a problem and to think it is more related to the speaker or the conditions and environment in which you are trying to listen," says Doherty (pictured below).

That factor, coupled with the stigma often associated with the idea of wearing a hearing aid, can prevent people from

getting the help that's available. In fact, according to Doherty, the average time lag between when someone begins to recognize they have trouble hearing and when they get a hearing aid is 10 years. That delay can result in early decline of cognitive abilities, difficulties in social and professional situations, and even depression. In her recent studies, Doherty has shown that hearing aids worn during the early stages of an age-related hearing loss can improve a person's performance on auditory working memory tests, and reduce their listening effort in background noise. She's working on getting the word out about the benefits of early detection and treatment of age-related hearing loss. "In the old days, a hearing aid was just an amplifier that made everything louder. We now have digital hearing aids that are finely tuned to the specific individual's hearing loss," she says. "So technology has come a long way, but still only 20 percent of people who could benefit from a hearing aid actually wear one. That statistic is even lower in the middle-age population:



Only 15 percent of people in their 50s who could benefit from a hearing aid are wearing one."

Doherty says the Aging Studies Institute supports her work by providing opportunities to interact and collaborate with colleagues who share her interest in people who are aging, but who have a different focus, approach, and area of expertise. For example, she was invited by law professor Mary Helen McNeal, director of the Elder Law Clinic at the College of Law, to provide feedback on a legal paper related to hearing aids. "People at ASI are so collaborative and supportive. It brings to the same table people who want to share ideas, which is a benefit to have right on campus," Doherty says. "We can share our own expertise to strengthen each other's research. And I always feel like it's a great place for me to get excited about my own research at a different level."



Enriching Lives through Design

MARJORIE DRINAN G'16 LOOKED AT A lot of graduate programs before finding exactly what she wanted in the new collaborative design master's degree program at the School of Design in the College of Visual and Performing Arts. "It interested me because the projects were centered on disability and aging, and that's personal for me," says Drinan, who worked at various nonprofit organizations for nine years before entering the program's inaugural class in fall 2014. "I have a loved one who deals with a psychosocial disability, so I view design as a way to help people like him. And my grandma had dementia—I actually took some time off as an undergrad to take care of her."

Industrial and interaction design professor Donald Carr, coordinator of the collaborative design graduate program, says the program was built on creating strategic alliances with the inherent strengths of the University. "The master's degree in collaborative design is about applying user-centered research methodologies and an iterative process that goes into solving any design problem," says Carr, an ASI faculty affiliate. "For us, aligning ourselves with the Aging Studies Institute is a great way to bring a complementary academic focus to the program."



Professor Donald Carr (left), collaborative design program coordinator, reviews student projects that explore innovative solutions to address elders' concerns.

Last spring, collaborative design students met with elders in the community to learn about their living situations and discern various concerns that could be addressed. "They spent several weeks establishing trust and understanding needs," Carr says. "Students also learned about elders' patterns of communication with friends and family, as well as how they obtain services and manage their lives on a daily basis. By taking an empathic approach to research, it's inevitable that multiple ideas emerge as to how to enrich their lives."

Drinan's project grew from her conversations with elders at a senior residence in Syracuse. "I noticed the issue of lack of control kept coming up, and some fear about speaking up for themselves," she says. In response, Drinan designed a board game, *Words from the Wise*, as a vehicle that allows discussion about difficult issues to be role-played in game form and, hopefully, helps break down barriers and improve communication.

At semester's end, Drinan and her fellow students in the program presented their projects at the ASI. "That was a wonderful opportunity for our students to present their ideas," Carr says. "In essence they had the perfect audience—a range of experts who are knowledgeable about multiple facets of what the students were presenting."

This semester, the program's focus shifted to adaptive design, another area with strong links to ASI and SU's many experts in the field of disability studies. For Drinan, it's further affirmation that she's in the right place. "I really like that our program is geared toward designing for the greater good," she says. "We're not just mindlessly pumping out another object that might end up in a landfill. We're looking at improving people's lives. That's the most valuable component for me."

Conversations with elders at a local senior residence inspired Marjorie Drinan G'16 to design a board game as part of her work in the collaborative design program.





Douglas Wolf, the Gerald B. Cramer Professor of Aging Studies, with ASI director Janet Wilmoth



Social work professor Deborah Monahan



Professor Alejandro Garcia with students in Lyman Hall

Interdisciplinary Research on Aging and Life Course Topics

Faculty affiliated with the Aging Studies Institute (ASI) are experts in such disciplines as anthropology, economics, engineering, law, neuroscience, psychology, policy studies, public administration, social work, sociology, and more. Their research interests define ASI's five overarching thematic areas:

Age-Based Public Policy and Well-Being addresses issues related to federal, state, and local policy. Among faculty doing research in this area is economics professor **Gary Engelhardt**, the Melvin A. Eggers Faculty Scholar in the Maxwell School, a national expert in the economics of aging whose research focuses on the impact of Social Security on economic well-being in retirement, the impact of health and cognition on housing decisions in old age, and the role of financial literacy in saving behavior.

Sociology professor **Jennifer Karas Montez**, who studies growing inequalities in adult mortality across education levels and geographic areas within the United States, recently participated in a Capitol Hill briefing on the topic of education and mortality, in addition to being invited by the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine to participate in an expert panel meeting on women's health and longevity.

Alejandro Garcia, the Jocelyn Falk Professor of Social Work, has been widely recognized for his distinguished career contributions related to social policy and elderly Latinos, including receiving the

Life Achievement Award from the Association of Latina and Latino Social Work Educators, being named Social Work Pioneer by the National Association of Social Workers, and receiving a Special Recognition Award for "outstanding leadership and advocacy on behalf of older adults" from the National Hispanic Council on Aging.

Social work professor **Eric Kingson** is one of the country's foremost authorities on Social Security. His most recent book, co-written with Nancy Altman, is *Social Security Works! Why Social Security Isn't Going Broke and How Expanding It Will Help Us All* (The New Press, 2015).

Population Aging considers the causes and consequences of a changing population age structure in the United States and worldwide. **Douglas Wolf**, the Gerald B. Cramer Professor of Aging Studies, is among the faculty doing leading research in this area. A demographer and policy analyst who studies aging and long-term care, he is on the steering committee of the National Health and Aging Trends Study, tracking trends in disability of older people.

He also directs the Center for Aging and Policy Studies.

Sociology professors **Andrew London** and **Janet Wilmoth** are research partners exploring the ways military service affects people's lives over time, including the health trajectories of older male veterans. Both are senior fellows in the University's Institute for Veterans and Military Families.

Family Dynamics, Care Work, and Intergenerational Support examines the nature of older adults' family relationships and the flow of support across generations. Among faculty conducting research within this theme is **Merril Silverstein**, the inaugural Marjorie Cantor Professor in Aging. An internationally recognized scholar on aging families, he does work that includes collaboration on the Longitudinal Study of Generations, tracking multigenerational families in California for four decades with a focus on family dynamics and mental health. He recently received two grants to investigate religious engagement in later life, including a \$1.49 million grant from the John Templeton Foundation.

Social Work professor **Deborah Monahan** has been a research investigator on projects related to the efficacy of support groups, community alternatives to long-term care, family caregiving, and kinship caregiving.

Health and Functioning addresses topics related to health across

the life course, including cognitive functioning, hearing loss, and disability. Biology professor **Donna Korol** is among the faculty working in this realm. Her research focuses on the shifts in the brain across the lifespan and seeks to understand the molecular and cellular processes that contribute to healthy aging and to pathological brain aging, including Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease. She also collaborates with the ASI in developing the Movement for Healthy Aging initiative.

Social work professor **Maria Brown G'05, G'10** is a social gerontologist who uses the life course perspective to research the later-life experiences of socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals, women, and racial and ethnic minorities. Her work also examines the long-term care experiences of cognitively disabled older adults and their caregivers.

Aging Design, Engineering, and Technology focuses on design issues related to aging, including inclusive design and medical devices. Among faculty doing research in this area are biomedical and chemical engineering professors **Jürgen Babirad** and **Jay Henderson**. Babirad is a specialist in rehabilitative and regenerative engineering whose work includes engaging undergraduates in hands-on projects, including vehicle modification for people with disabilities. In his research, Henderson explores the use of polymers in bone regeneration. «