

# transitions

INSTITUTE OF GERONTOLOGY

Promoting Successful Aging in Detroit and Beyond

Spring 2011

## Safe Passage for Our Possessions: Meaning and Messages in Downsizing

Whether we surround ourselves with objects or stay spare and resist clutter, by the time we reach 60 or 70, we accumulate a household of possessions. Combine that with the fact that many of us will move to smaller quarters at least once as we age, and we face the problem of downsizing.

What do we keep? What do we give away? Who do we give it to? Can keeping the right objects help us better adapt to our new home? These questions resonate with older adults and their families everywhere. Fortunately, researchers at the IOG and the University of Kansas have

spent the past three years answering these questions. This study is answering practical concerns and key scientific debates about how to adapt to life changes. One paper from their research, "Safe Passage of Goods and Self in Later Life" was recently submitted to the journal *Ageing & Society*.

Drs. Mark Luborsky and Cathy Lysack head the IOG portion of the study, interviewing 40 adults (age 65 and up) in the Detroit area after a move to smaller quarters, and 20 additional persons before and after their moves. One part of the



study focused on the transfer of cherished possessions. While people gave some items to charity and held a few yard sales, their cherished items required special placement. They were giving away more than the object itself; they were passing along what the object symbolized and the story of its significance. Finding a good home for valued possessions in late life takes time, thought and sometimes a tough skin. Some were disappointed when the person they presumed would

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ACTIVE IOG team (l to r)  
Vivian Preston, June Clark, Dianne Rhodes and Khallela Ahmad.

After more than a decade of research into how older adults learn and remember, the ACTIVE study at the IOG takes another pause. The Advanced Cognitive Training for Independent and Vital Elderly study worked with more than 2,800 adults nationwide (481 from the Detroit area) to improve cognitive performance. June Clark worked with ACTIVE since 1997, and as study coordinator since 2003.

Originally, ACTIVE trained participants then followed them each year for two years. Training went so well the study, under WSU investigators Michael Marsiske (now at University of Florida) and Peter Lichtenberg, was funded for follow-ups at three, five and ten years. After the five-year follow-up, ACTIVE received major national attention for its findings that training was highly effective in boosting elders' cognition, with gains lasting up to five years. Trainees also reported less limitation with tasks of daily living. Investigators are now reviewing 10-year results with several new findings expected later in 2011.

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## Can't Give it Away? Tips to Help Let Go

For some people, downsizing seems overwhelming and they can become paralyzed with indecision. This can be a signal that it's time for some "emotional housecleaning" to help break free of attachments.

### Why It Can Be Hard

1. Objects are part of our history and help to tell the story of who we are. Many of us have objects that have been around longer than our friends.

2. Objects can bring us pleasure. Surrounding ourselves with beautiful things makes life brighter.

3. Objects trigger memories and allow us to relive previous roles (mother, daughter, employee) that still bring satisfaction and pride in our contributions to others.

4. American culture measures status by what we have. If you have things, especially lots of expensive things, you are viewed as a success.

5. We fear that letting go of our objects means losing a part of ourselves.

6. Older adults today grew up in the Great Depression and know what it is like to "have very little" and "go without," making it especially difficult to give things away.

### How to Break Free

1. Objects have a life cycle. They are unlikely to be as valuable to the present generation as they were to you.

2. We can remake ourselves through our objects. Getting rid of things can lighten our psychological load and free us to be remade anew.

3. The Process: Select what major items to retain. Give away meaningful items to people who will appreciate them and do it now — don't wait. Part of the joy of gift giving is seeing the gift being enjoyed by its recipient. Sort the remainder into keep, donate, sell and discard piles. Keep it only if it will fit, if it means something to you and if you know you'll need it.

4. Use the house-fire test to determine what to keep. What would you grab first if your house was on fire?

5. Remember we are more than our things. Our true legacy lies in our relationships, actions, beliefs and character. If our essence is passed along to those we care about, we will live on — no extra stuff needed.

The circumstances that prompt a move in later life vary greatly — from wanting to live closer to family members, to reducing household chores. The downsizing event can come suddenly, through an unexpected health crisis, or thoughtfully as in the decision to live in a warmer climate. Regardless of the reason, most downsizers interviewed in this study were satisfied with their downsizing and how their possessions were ultimately dispersed. When asked if she'd lost a bit of herself in the move, one woman replied: "If I did, it's been replaced with a feeling of safety. And the feeling that I was able to do it all myself. I probably gained more by moving than I lost."

## Downsize *from page 1*

value the item was not interested. Others were warmed to discover that a friend or relative had a stronger-than-expected attachment to the item and was honored to receive it. One woman had friends over to dinner and "their daughter just loved a painting I had, and I just took it off the wall and handed it to her," she said. "It gave me a lot of pleasure." Many items were given with stories attached so the recipient would know the history and meaning behind the item. A contextual history can help us transmit a little of ourselves along with the object.

# Ready for Tomorrow? *Seniors Count!* Can Help

Baby boomers are on the march, stampeding toward middle and old age. The oldest boomers turn 65 this year; the majority are already over 55. While we know much about the history of this generation and the explosion of schools, houses, jobs and consumer goods needed to sustain their early and middle years, we seem unprepared to handle their future. The agencies tasked with helping them aren't always certain about who they are or what they need.

Enter *Seniors Count!*, a two-year pilot project to provide accurate, easy-to-understand statistics on the social, economic and health status of southeast Michigan seniors. Developed through a partnership between the IOG and Adult Well-Being Services (funded by the the Kresge Foundation, the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan and the American House Foundation), *Seniors Count!* aims to help prepare for the specific needs of its older adults. "In the next two decades we'll see a near doubling of the senior population," said Dr. Thomas B. Jankowski, director of the *Seniors Count!* data core and associate director of the IOG, as well as chair of The Senior Alliance Advisory Council. "There's a big change a' coming and we'd better get ready for it."

The team has written two papers and launched its public *Seniors Count!* website at <http://www.seniorscount.org>. Anyone can log in to read reports and ask specific questions. Eventually, users will have direct access to the data in a user-friendly format that is regularly updated. Now, though,



IOG *Seniors Count!* Team: Jason Booza Ph.D., Carrie Leach, Dr. Jankowski

*"We're a compassionate society. If we have the right information, we make the right decisions."*

visitors submit the request to Dr. Jankowski and he posts the answer on his public blog. "We're operating as a kind of service bureau until we can get tools out for people to use themselves," Dr. Jankowski said. He hopes to expand the project throughout Michigan and even become a model for other states.

Their first paper, "An Income Profile of Older Adult Householders in Southeast Michigan," shows definitively that the single most important source of income for the seven-county residents is Social Security. So while the optimistic perception is that many older adults live comfortably on pensions and investments, *Seniors Count!* showed that 62% of area seniors receive half or more of their income from Social Security. The income gap between richest and poorest is large. The median senior income in Bloomfield Township is \$78,393; in Hamtramck it's only \$16,973.

Their second paper profiles gender differences in living conditions, health and disability. According to Dr. Jankowski, older women are more likely to live in poverty than older men, partly because women live longer and are more often widowed. "These women come from a generation when they were less likely to work outside the home and therefore did not accrue retirement benefits," he said. "Their income depends on their husband." Disability affects the genders differently, too. Men are more likely to suffer hearing loss, while women have difficulty walking, climbing stairs and getting around independently.

What services are these seniors most likely to need? "Supportive services that allow people to remain in their homes," said Dr. Jankowski. "In their own homes, people maintain ties to their community. They retain independence. They maintain their social status, their role in the community and their sense of purpose."

From a practical perspective, home-based care costs far less than most alternatives, since most older adults need just a little help to stay in their home. If service agencies gear up to satisfy these needs, Dr. Jankowski said, we can relieve many emotional and financial burdens from family caregivers and help everyone to age better.



For more information visit: [www.seniorscount.org](http://www.seniorscount.org)



## Seniors Count!

## AWARDS & HONORS



**Director Peter Lichtenberg**, with Karmanos Cancer Center's **Dr. Teri Albrecht**, won the 2010 Spirit of Collaboration Award from the Michigan Cancer Consortium for their work with the Detroit Community Network Program (CNP). The research aims to reduce health disparities in older, underserved African Americans. The CNP was recently re-named the Southeast Michigan Partners Against Cancer (SEMPAC) and is a collaboration with the Karmanos Cancer Center.

IOG doctoral student **Elham Mahmoudi** won three awards this fall. In September, her poster *Diverging Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Access to Physician Care* took 2nd place in the WSU School of Medicine graduate student research day. She analyzed changes in health disparities from 2000-2007. This stellar research also won Elham the 2010 Carol Estes Award (and a \$500 prize) for excellence in research based on a paper submitted to the Gerontological Society of America. In November, she won the 2010 Senior Service America Junior Scholar Award for the same research. Elham is a doctoral candidate at the IOG and the department of economics working under the mentorship of **Dr. Gail Jensen**.



The **U.S. Census Bureau** recognized the **IOG** as a valued partner in the 2010 Census helping to raise awareness and inspire participation through its many outreach programs.



**Andrew Bender**, doctoral candidate in experimental psychology, took first place at the IOG's annual Research Awareness Day for his poster on the relationship between hypertension, the Apolipoprotein E gene and memory performance to identify dementia at an earlier, treatable stage. Second place went to **Elham Mahmoudi** and third place to **Daniel Paulson** for his work on depression, cognitive function and mortality in persons over the age of 80.

**Kirk Rodgers**, an IOG doctoral student, won the Everett J. Soop Award from the Michigan Society of Gerontology for his outstanding academic performance and interest in the field of aging. This is the second year in a row the coveted Soop Award was won by an IOG trainee.

**Ana Daugherty**, a doctoral student working with **Dr. Naftali Raz** in the Cognitive Neuroscience Lab, flew to the Aging and Cognition Conference in Dallas in February to present her studies on iron deposits in the brain and how they may be related to neurodegeneration. Andrew Bender also attended the conference to present his work.

IOG faculty **Kay Cresci, Ph.D., R.N.**, published "Bridging the Digital Divide for Urban Seniors: Community Partnership" in *Geriatric Nursing* (vol. 3, 6) outlining how more urban seniors can gain computer access and proficiency, especially for managing their health.

**Hector Gonzalez, Ph.D.**, published "Health Care Quality Perceptions among Foreign-Born Latinos and the Importance of Speaking the Same Language" in the journal *Language and Health Care Among Latinos*. He found that meeting a patient's language needs – talking the same language – improved satisfaction and understanding of the healthcare provided and may reduce ethnic and racial health care disparities.



Clockwise from TOP left: Larry Kitchen, Jean Holmes, Lou Miller, and Gloria Sniderman exchange ideas, during a "Memories to Memoirs" workshop

## Aging the Write Way

Writers come in all colors, shapes, sizes, and ages. Being older as a writer is often a plus; the varied life experiences that come with age provide rich material. So it's a natural fit for the IOG to not only encourage creative writing but to help older adults perfect their craft with monthly writing workshops called "Memories to Memoirs."

"It's important for people to share their history with themselves and their family," said Donna MacDonald, director of community outreach at the IOG. "Detroit has a deep history of oral and written storytelling so it's a natural progression."

The first IOG writing workshop began in 2009 with 45 people enrolled plus a waiting list. Many of the writers had submitted creative works to the annual Art of Aging Successfully Conference and were excited about strengthening their skills. Their instructor, Gabriell Turner, is a member of the National Association of Black Storytellers, and had been teaching story-telling at Hannan House. He conducted four three-hour sessions that went so well, the writers didn't want to stop. Follow-on workshops formed and continue to this day.

"Our writers love Gabriell," Donna said. "His natural warmth and passion for writing shine through." Gabriell enjoys the challenge. "I learn while I teach," he said. He also likes to give something back to the folks in his hometown.

May Berkley, a founding member of the Elder Advisors to Research at the IOG, also believed in the power of story telling and in giving back. When she passed away in 2006 at age 89, a memorial fund

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# Partnership

## Board Member Raises \$14,000 with New Fund



Don Haas understands money.

A financial consultant since 1956, Don has been cited as one of the 300 Best Financial Advisors in America. He is president of the Haas Institute for Wealth & Aging, has taught financial planning, written two books, hosted a weekly CBS radio show and been an expert commentator on Fox TV Detroit. Don's commitment to helping older adults manage their money permeates everything he does.

So as a board member at the IOG, Don wanted to increase support and awareness for much-needed research into financial gerontology. A few weeks before Christmas, Don sent out a challenge to his many friends and clients: "If you send the IOG a donation in support of financial gerontology research, I'll match every gift, dollar for dollar, up to \$10,000." His appeal included an explanation of the IOG's mission and why financial gerontology research is critical to the health and well-being of older adults and caregivers.

Don's friends, clients, and IOG board members rallied. Within a month, they donated \$7,000. Don has matched that amount, making the IOG the lucky recipient of \$14,000 to support research into aging and finances. We thank Don deeply and look forward to adding research knowledge to the field of financial gerontology.

## Surprise Gift Aids Research



The IOG was deeply moved by the recent generosity of Mrs. Janet Rowe whose estate plan provided for a \$25,000 gift. The funds will enhance gerontology research in memory of Mrs. Rowe and her husband Lloyd, who passed away in 1996. The couple was married for 48 years.

Mrs. Rowe passed away on Sept. 27 at age 97 after leading a full, interesting and exciting life. During World War II, she earned the rank of Yeoman First Class in the WAVES (Women Accepted

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**YES!** I'd like to contribute to WSU Institute of Gerontology to promote successful aging research and outreach.

\$250     \$100     \$50

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## PARTNERSHIP IN ACTION



## Heartland Gives Back To Help Seniors Live Well

Heartland Health Care Center is an IOG Gold Partner dedicated to education and direct care services to help older adults age well. This nationwide organization employs 60,000 caregivers who provide a broad range of services that include skilled nursing and rehabilitation, assisted living, long-term care, continuum of care, and hospice. Heartland has sponsored dozens of IOG events, providing experts, materials and even lunch to seniors in attendance. Heartland also supports continuing education programs to ensure that the professionals charged with caring for our older adults remain at the peak of their skills and knowledge.

for Volunteer Emergency Service) serving in Navy headquarters in D.C. She and Lloyd married in 1948, built a large social circle of friends, and led a "whirlwind life" as world travelers and sports car enthusiasts.

After Lloyd's death, Mrs. Rowe moved into the American House Senior Living Residence in Dearborn Heights. There her good friends since 1975 – IOG board members Gene and Jean Pisha – visited regularly bringing news of IOG achievements. "Janet would be proud that her donation will be well-used by people devoted to under-

standing the process of aging," Gene said. "Janet lived well, aged well, and wanted to give back. There is much we could learn from her example."

## Write *from page 4*

was established at the IOG in her honor. That fund helped the IOG provide the room, journals, lunch and instruction for the first writing classes. We sincerely thank May for her generosity of spirit and the approximately 100 writers who have been inspired to preserve the stories of their lives.

**Institute of Gerontology**

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Detroit, MI 48202  
313.577.2297  
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*Promoting Successful Aging in Detroit and Beyond*

## UPCOMING EVENTS

### OPEN TO THE PUBLIC (Programs FREE unless otherwise noted)

Lunch 'n Learn events include lunch (by Heartland Health Care) and screenings for blood pressure and glucose (by Quality Home Health Care). RSVP to 313-871-0735.

March 30 (10:30 – 1:00) Lunch 'n Learn

#### **Lifestyle Changes to Reduce Risks in Obesity and Diabetes**

Butzel Family Center, 7737 Kercheval St., Detroit 48214

April 13 (10:30 – 1:00) Lunch 'n Learn

#### **Don't Wait Until It's Too Late: Stroke Prevention and Treatment**

Farwell Recreation Center, 2711 E. Outer Dr., Detroit, MI 48234

April 13 (11:30 -2:00) Lunch 'n Learn

#### **Careers in Aging: Education and Employment**

Freer House at 71 E. Ferry, 2nd Floor Hoobler Room, Detroit, MI 48202

Learn how to translate your passion for working with older adults into a career.

Register at dy6149@wayne.edu.

June 6 (8:00 am – 2:00 pm)

#### **Healthier Black Elders Health Reception REGISTRATION FORM REQUIRED**

Greater Grace Conference Center, 23500 W. 7 Mile Road, Detroit, MI 48219

June is Men's Health Month so all guests can bring along a male friend or relative to hear key health messages from a panel of medical experts. Free health screenings and lunch. Registration form available online at [www.iog.wayne.edu](http://www.iog.wayne.edu) or call 313-577-1000 to receive a form. Register early; space is limited. **You must return a registration form to be registered.**

For updates and weekly colloquia presentations visit: [www.iog.wayne.edu](http://www.iog.wayne.edu)

## Continuing Education Program

These Alzheimer's Association programs are run concurrently to educate audiences with different information needs. Both programs take place on April 26 at Shriners Silver Garden Events Center.

### APRIL 26 (9 – 11:50AM) FREE

#### **Alzheimer's Disease: A Caregiver's Personal Journey**

Shriners Silver Garden Events Center, 24350 Southfield Road, Southfield, MI 48075

Done in partnership with the Alzheimer's Association Greater Michigan Chapter.

Details at [www.iog.wayne.edu](http://www.iog.wayne.edu). Registration required to [jean.barnas@alz.org](mailto:jean.barnas@alz.org)

### APRIL 26 (8 – 11:50AM) (5.5 CEs), \$35

#### **Alzheimer's Disease: A Professional Approach to a Personal Disease**

Shriners Silver Garden Events Center, 24350 Southfield Road, Southfield, MI 48075

CE credits available for nursing, occupational and physical therapy and social work.

Register online at [www.alz.org/gmc](http://www.alz.org/gmc) or call Jean Barnas at 248-996-1052.

### APRIL 28 (8AM – 12:30PM) (3 CEs), FREE

#### **Enhancing Life for Older Adults: Mind, Body and Spirit**

Waltonwood at Cherry Hill, 42600 Cherry Hill, Canton, MI 48187

CE credits granted to nurses, social workers and nursing home administrators.

Presented in partnership with Singh Senior Living.

Details at [www.iog.wayne.edu](http://www.iog.wayne.edu) or call Donna at 313-577-2297.



### MAY 9-10 (8:30 – 4:00)

#### **Issues in Aging Professional CE Conference**

Dearborn Inn, 20301 Oakwood Blvd., Dearborn, MI 48124

Details and registration form at [www.iog.wayne.edu](http://www.iog.wayne.edu)

For more information: [www.iog.wayne.edu](http://www.iog.wayne.edu) or call 313-875-6834