

Education's new wrinkle

Learning was vital to elderly ex-student

Stories
By JIM GERSBACH
Of the Emerald

Vincent Simonton died during finals week of winter term 1980. He had just finished a paper for his gerontology class when he went to his bedroom, lay down and had a heart attack. He died a short while later.

Simonton, who was 72, was one of a growing number of students over 55 years old attending the University. Like many of these older students, learning was one of the most important things in life to Simonton.

Simonton was a professional photographer most of his adult life, and took World War II reconnaissance photos of Nagasaki before the atomic bomb fell on the city. He was among the first detail of American soldiers to enter the devastated city.

He never forgot the sights, sounds and smells of Nagasaki, says his widow, Betty Simonton. Those war experiences enabled Simonton, like many other older students, to bring a special richness to his classes, a wealth of living he readily shared with younger students.

"He would sit down and talk to people about their experiences and relate that to how he had handled similar things in his own life," says Ted Cope, a classmate and friend of Simonton's.

Simonton's readiness to share his enthusiasm for learning and living stemmed in part from a realization that he'd been given a second chance.

"In July of 1969 Vince died in my arms in the emergency room after having a heart attack," says Simonton's widow, Betty. "I asked God to bring him back if he had work to do."

A medical team brought him back to life, and Simonton's new vocation became encouraging learning among his aging peers and showing young people that wrinkles don't mean the end of life.

After recovering from his heart attack, Simonton enrolled at Linn-Benton Community College and eventually became LBCC's oldest graduate. While there Simonton met Cope, who was young enough to be his grandson.

For Cope and his wife Jodi, Simonton offered a model of what old age could be.

"He was very young in spirit," says Jodi Cope. "He was always reaching for higher goals. I'd like to be the same when I'm 72."

Simonton broke down campus age barriers by helping younger classmates know an older person as an individual. Simonton felt students would remember what he said when they were older, or when they met an older person, says his widow.

Jodi Cope agrees. "Knowing Vince, I've been able to be more comfortable around the elderly. I didn't used to know how to act around the elderly. But after having met Vince I realize I'm a part of them.

"I've also learned," says Jodi, "that since the elderly have been through so many experiences we have yet to go through that we can learn from them."

Her husband Ted agrees. "If I had as much belief in myself as Vincent did, I'd be really well off. He knew what he wanted, he knew where he was going."



Graphic by Sioux Anderson

Simonton refused to be treated as an unapproachable father figure, say his friends. "He knew he had a lot to learn," says Ted Cope. "He didn't consider himself wise."

Peer acceptance for Simonton was very important, says Betty. "He didn't like to be considered a fuddy-duddy. He believed in young people. He just loved the students on campus and the way they accepted him.

"Learning was exciting to him. He'd come home and say, 'Honey, hey, look at this,'" Betty Simonton says.

"It was possible not only for him to take the courses but to get A's and B's."

That sense of belonging, of making a contribution, meant the difference between life and death for Simonton, says his widow. "We both felt that it probably made a difference of whether he lived or died.

"Even though it was ironic that he died during finals week, he was doing what he wanted to."

Elderly in college promote new ideas

Along with the rest of the country, the average age of University students is getting higher. And it's not just because there are fewer 18 to 22-year-olds.

Older people are returning to school in increasing numbers, bringing needed tuition dollars and making new demands on the system.

Those tuition dollars amounted to \$376,000 from the Community Education Program during the 1979-80 school year, says Chris Munoz, outgoing director of CEP.

Older students especially demand more practical, hands-on instruction and more accountable instructors in return for their tuition, says Munoz.

"You take a person with three teenage sons, a \$55,000 mortgage and a full-time job. If he makes an appointment and the professor doesn't show, he will be out a lot more than an 18-year-old student who may be able to schedule another meeting more easily."

Older students, especially those in the daytime labor force, are asking for more night classes. Night students already outnumber day students three-to-two at schools such as San Jose State in California, says Munoz, and the trend is growing.

Classroom learning also may be altered as older students take more lecture classes, says Munoz.

"Older students usually bring more real world experiences to class than younger students." They can draw on their own experiences to offer a perspective other than the professor's, he adds, making learning a group process rather than just accepting or rejecting what a professor says.

Although two students claim to be 99, the campus' oldest currently enrolled student probably is an 88-year-old man who asked not to be identified.

But while the influx of older students will bring changes to University programs, older students themselves face adjustment hurdles in returning to school.

After decades of earning a living or raising a family, many are insecure about returning to college, says Mickey Donahue of the University's Lifelong Learning Services.

"The homemaker in her 40s or 50s who has been widowed or divorced is sort of in never-never land. She's not eligible for welfare because her family is raised, she has no recent work experience, and she's not eligible for unemployment," says Delpha Camp, a counselor with Displaced Homemakers, an organization that counsels widowed, divorced and separated homemakers on campus and from the community.

About 65 percent of all older students are women, most of whom return to college either to gain marketable job skills or "to follow a lifelong dream, to become something they've always wanted to be," says Camp.

"Most are suffering from a tremendous lack of self-confidence," she adds.

They doubt their own capacity to think as fast as younger students, she says, but they usually do well in classes. Motivation is a big factor in their success.

"Their parents aren't paying the bill," says Camp. "And they don't have their whole life in front of them where they can take a year off."

Urban Indians experience conflict of values

By LESLIE FARRIS
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Problems of urban living have driven Native Americans of many tribes to become members of one community, according to a group of Indian leaders.

"Seattle today is a conglomeration of American Indians and Alaska Natives — 20,000 Indian people representing 200 different tribes," Harold Belmont said Thursday at the American Indian Urban Community 1981 symposium.

"As we live in an urban setting, many of the difficulties we experience in city life is the conflict in values between living in that setting and being home on the reservation," said Belmont, a member of the Seattle Indian Health Board.

"I was told that the difference in values can be defined very academically," he said. "The value of the dominant society is one of ownership, but the value of the native society is one of being."

"These problems begin to create further problems," he added, "problems of identity, problems of survival — employment, education, housing."

Another Indian value not fully appreciated by the rest of society is sharing, said Tallulah Pinkham of the

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Yakima Indian Health Service. Pinkham said a word for greed does not exist in her native language.

"A great misrepresentation by the non-Indian world is that Indians are so docile, that you can take anything from them," she said. "But we were taught to respect the human being, and to share. If you give hate, you receive hate."

Pinkham said problems of American Indian children attending public schools sometimes can be attributed to value differences. Children taught by traditional parents to listen and remain silent may be considered dull and uncooperative by their public school teachers.

However, because of "the changing world," Pinkham said even enemy tribes now are joining together to celebrate their common heritage and solve their common problems.

"I'm feeling better because we are all becoming one," she said. "We are beginning to realize how we have to protect the things we reservation people and traditional people took for granted."

Identity problems of urban Native Americans is partly responsible for the nearly 60 percent alcoholism rate of their population, Belmont said. He calls it "the most devastating problem" facing his community.

"To be quite frank with you, alcoholism and Indians in prison are really not a priority among a lot of our people," Belmont said. "But we began to find that if we approached this with a positive attitude, we could develop resources to meet the need. We began to find out that existence in an urban jungle could become a little more comfortable."

The Seattle Indian Health Board established a program to provide treatment, rehabilitation, education and counseling for Indian and Alaskan Native alcoholics.

"Clients find it easier to relate to counselors who share their cultural background," Belmont said. "One of the most neglected areas in the treatment and rehabilitation of alcoholics has been the spiritual aspects."

He said 90 percent of Native Americans in jails are put there for alcohol-related crimes.

"We believe alcoholism is the number-one social and health problem today throughout this great country of ours," Belmont said. "But we want to share with you the encouragement that things can be done."

The symposium, sponsored by the University's Native American Student Union, continues today in Room 167 EMU.