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Northfield Retirement Community awarded for St. Olaf collaboration

By SAM WILMES swilmes@northfieldnews.com Apr 9, 2019

Northfield Retirement Community is being recognized for its partnership with St. Olaf College, a hands-on learning collaboration that has helped college students connect with residents for 15 years.

Retirement Community Director of Social Services Belinda Peterson and Retirement Community Director of Activities Milosha Malecha will accept the President's Community Partner Award from Minnesota Campus Compact award on behalf of the center at the 2019 Minnesota Summit & Presidents' Awards Luncheon from 11:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. at St. Catherine University in St. Paul.

"Northfield Retirement Community was nominated for the award for its 15 years of partnering with St. Olaf College in providing social work internships and vocational exploration along with the Story Partner Program that matches residents with one-on-one visits," a press release stated. "NRC is committed to educating the students about issues related to aging and also provides excellent on-board orientation, ongoing event support and transportation for students."

Malecha called the honor "an amazing award that NRC is getting that St. Olaf was gracious enough to apply for and receive."

"The award is very humbling," she said.

On average, 15 students participate in the program every year, which is part of their syllabus. Malecha said residents "light up" when they see students.

Although part of the curriculum includes students saying goodbye to mimic professional situations, they have sometimes decided to adopt residents they were paired with and continue meeting with them every month.

"It's a very powerful experience," Malecha said.

The award is given to community-based organizations that enhance community quality of life and educational outcomes, nurturing the relationship with a partnering Minnesota Campus Compact member college or university.

St. Olaf junior and Story Partner participant Ella Skrien and Retirement Community resident Dick Cover, 85, began meeting in October for nine approximately one-hour weekly sessions.

“Me trying to say as little as I can and let Dick tell me stories and integrate the things I learned from my social work classes,” Skrien said of her approach to the conversations. “Everything from body language and different things like that, and using the skills that we were learning about in conversations.”



St. Olaf College junior and Story Partner participant Ella Skrien and Northfield Retirement Community resident Dick Cover bonded during nine sessions from October to December as part of the school program. (Sam Wilmes/Northfield News)

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Cover, now 85, described his childhood spent on a goat farm in Modesto, California, to Skrien during their interaction. He described traveling more than 100 miles one way to deliver goat milk to Pleasanton, California, all while attending school.

Cover enjoys talking about his experiences as a student, band member and singing in the comedic opera H.M.S Pentafour.

“I’ve enjoyed seeing St. Olaf students,” he said.

To Skrien, “everyone involved has benefits coming out of it, because I know a lot of students maybe don’t quite get the opportunity to engage with older generations.”

She said the sessions provide a sufficient enough time for college students and residents to bond.

“We get close, because after an hour for two or three times, it’s like you run out of the basic, surface-level things to talk about, and I think that’s what’s really cool about this program, because of the length of it, you kind of get to dig a little deeper into the stories,” Skrien said.

Peterson noted in a press release she has worked with St. Olaf’s social work internship program for more than 15 years.

“What a blessing it is to see these ‘deer-in-the-headlights’ students transform into confident advocates for seniors at NRC and later in their social work professions beyond St. Olaf,” she said.

Malecha said the program is expected to expand to different St. Olaf programs and professors, and she spoke highly of the work St. Olaf social work program professors Suzy Smalling and Melissa Mendez undertake.

“It’s a great program and a great team to work with,” Malecha said.

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