

# Exploring Gerontological Social Work Through the Hartford Practicum Partnership Program

Contributed by Kathryn Maclean

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Editor's Note: This article is excerpted from the book, *Days in the Lives of Gerontological Social Workers*, edited by Linda May Grobman and Dara Bergel Bourassa.

My classmates thought I was having a financial crisis. Why else would a person choose to work with older adults? I had only worked with youth in the past. A year with AmeriCorps in a community school and more than a year teaching in a self-contained classroom for at-risk youth made me want to try something new. Older adults faced different challenges from the youth I had worked with in the past. I wanted to explore a career path where I could make a difference not just in someone's life, but also in their day. The Hartford Foundation's Practicum Partnership Program (PPP) seemed like a great opportunity to explore something new.

When I applied for the program in December 2005, I wasn't sure what to expect. The program called for an intensive practicum rotation model. I would work at three practica sites for 10 weeks each. The goal was to discover if short, intensive exposure at numerous sites increased a student's competency in each of several aging competencies for working with older adults. (Since I started the program, the model has been changed to include longer rotations and a leadership seminar.)

## Rotation 1: Molly the Pup

I began my field experience at an assisted living facility run by the Catholic Church in Saint Louis. It was small, sad, and had that odor that makes people avoid visits to their grandparents. My first thought was: How fast can I complete my hours and move on to someplace less depressing? Day after day working in this facility would surely end my interest in aging. I was interested in macro-level practice, so the idea of creating a care plan for a resident didn't appeal to me.

I held on to these thoughts for the first few days. Then, something amazing took place. One of the residents' daughters brought her dog to the assisted living facility. I had never seen such a dramatic response. Molly, the pup, brought joy and excitement into the usually depressing facility. Everyone wanted a turn to pet her and give her a doggie biscuit. She had never eaten so well! A visit from a dog spurred what had been only a marginal interest into a career. How rewarding, to make someone's entire day, if not week, with one furry guest. My previous ideas about aging were slowly fading into new ones. I realized that I might actually be able to do the "good works" that made me choose social work as a profession.

My days at the facility were spent working in direct care services. On some days, I helped one of the residents, who had terrible tremors, write letters to her son. The two hours that we spent together were so meaningful to her. She found something that she could look forward to each week, and it also helped me greatly to know that my simple actions could affect someone in such a positive way.

While there, I also spent time with the community social worker, visiting caregivers and their loved ones in their homes. The objective for most of these visits was to help support the caregiver and work on finding resources.

## Rotation 2: Silver Haired Senators

At the conclusion of my first 10 weeks, I moved to the St. Louis Area Agency on Aging. There I applied my macro skills by organizing the local chapter of the Silver Haired Legislature, a group of seniors over age 65 who advocate for state support of senior services. They were active, articulate older adults who participated in meetings as mock senators and representatives of their constituencies. I learned much about the political process from them. For my final task, I helped them plan a trip to Jefferson City to advocate for themselves on behalf of senior issues. I made friends among the group, with whom I remain in contact to this day.

On a daily basis at SLAAA, I worked in the Information and Assistance Department, connecting area seniors with home-delivered meals, tax help, and any other services that they may have needed. This was an especially interesting agency to work at during the summer, because St. Louis suffered a storm-related blackout. For a significant part of my practicum experience, I helped triage phone calls as SLAAA, city government, and other local agencies provided water, food, and ice to seniors who were without power for more than a week. Because this meant that many were left without air conditioning in the sweltering St. Louis summer, I got to be a part of an evacuation of residents to local cooling sites. It was a crash course in collaboration.

## Rotation 3: Macro Talents Realized

From the AAA, I moved on to my third and final rotation at the St. Louis Chapter of the Alzheimer's Association. At this practicum site, I recognized all of my macro-level interest and talents. I worked in the Outreach Department and, through this placement, worked on several community projects and initiatives. My first major project was the Faith Leaders Conference. Its main objective was to educate interfaith leaders about the signs and symptoms of Alzheimer's disease, and how to support both the people with this diagnosis and their caregivers. My other tasks included law enforcement outreach and education, as well as fundraising events. I lectured extensively throughout the area on all facets of dementia support, from research to resources. In a burst of good fortune, my practicum at the

Alzheimer's Association led to a temporary position at one of its major annual fundraisers, the Memory Walk in St. Charles County, Missouri.

#### Conclusion

Every day that I went to one of my sites, my view of older adults and their needs changed. I learned new ways of thinking about aging and the venues in which services are provided. There exist as many ways to age as there are people. The aging field is not only skilled nursing facilities with lonely residents languishing in smelly corridors waiting for their time to die. Working with older adults can be a dynamic experience. My field placement experience widened my perceptions of aging.

Through my work at the Alzheimer's Association, I found my macro-level niche at an organization that works for practice and policy change, the best of both worlds. Through outreach and education, I served older adults, and simultaneously engaged the community.

Through my experiences in direct service, local government (the AAA), and a national nonprofit, I realized that there are many ways to work with older adults, challenging current perceptions of aging and the aging process. As the aging population increases, so will the opportunity to work with the aging in new ways. My thanks go to the Hartford Foundation for recognizing a need for gerontologically competent social workers and offering support to bring people into the field.

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For more information about the Hartford Practicum Partnership Program and the Geriatric Social Work Initiative, see <http://www.gswi.org/programs/ppp.html> .