

## Learning Together With The Senior Center

By Britta Powell

As the religion professor concludes her lecture and dismisses her students, they gather their belongings and begin to chat amongst themselves about today's lecture topic, their other classes, and plans for the rest of the day. In many ways, it seems like an unremarkable scene, but these students are not Gustavus college students. They're St. Peter's seniors, taking advantage of one of the Senior Center's new LIFE (Learning is ForEver) classes. This religion lecture about the history of unbelief in America is just one of many classes on a range of topics from technology to history to literature. I'm here at the Community Center to observe LIFE classes as part of my partnership with the St. Peter Senior Center (SPSC). This partnership is a central component of ENG-310: Writing and Nonprofits, one of the Community-Based Learning (CBL) courses at Gustavus.

In Writing and Nonprofits, we students immerse ourselves in the activities of our community partners—local nonprofits. In my case, two other classmates and I attend as many of the Senior Center's LIFE classes as possible, recording detailed observations and interviewing participants and instructors. Then we share our research with the SPSC so they can continue to improve the program and better meet the needs of the community. It's a win-win: I get to practice my writing and interviewing skills while the Senior Center benefits from my efforts. Conveniently, St Peter seniors are great interviewees and eager to share both appreciation and suggestions for the program. For example, two women who attended the religion lecture above spoke to me about how they'd appreciated a previous class on Islam because they'd wanted to better understand the Somali population in St. Peter. They suggested a multi-session course on Islam and Somali culture in conjunction with Somali residents to reinforce positive cross-cultural

relationships in St. Peter.

An important part of the nonprofit/student relationship in CBL courses is reciprocity, or a mutually beneficial relationship between the student and the community partner. One mutual benefit in Writing and Nonprofits is the grant-writing process that students engage in throughout the semester. As we've learned more of the ins and outs of the Senior Center, my classmates and I have identified some salient needs of the organization, such as marketing, expansion of the LIFE program, and technology purchases. Using these needs and our understanding of the organization, another class assignment is to craft grant proposals that are well-researched and fit the narrative of the nonprofit's mission. While the assignment may seem like just an exercise, the Senior Center will likely find our proposals to be useful as they seek ways to fund future endeavors.

Applying the strategies and concepts I'm learning in class in an impactful way in the community *as* I'm learning them is a unique educational structure. While I learn a lot through the academic writing I do in most classes, it often lacks real-world connection and usefulness. I'm finding that community-based learning brings a new motivation to my class work because I know the investment of my time and effort into the class can and will have a real effect on the seniors and SPSC staff I've gotten to know this semester. And as a graduating senior preparing for life after Gustavus, this CBL class inspires me to look for a community-engaged career.