

## Grown-Up Story Time

By Laura Isdahl

For a brief moment at Ecumen Prairie Hill Senior Living Center, the only sound comes from pencils scratching across pages, as residents dive deep within their memories to write their own stories. The moment breaks when a ninety-five-year old resident decides he'd rather talk to the Gustavus student next to him, so the student grabs his notebook and scribbles to keep up with the stories spilling out of his memory. The ten residents descend into a comfortable chaos of asking questions, discussing prompts, and sharing tales with Gustavus students from English 310: Writing and Nonprofits. These students partnered up for the creative writing workshop, "Our Stories," helping senior writers transcribe memories of childhood, home, and grandchildren's accomplishments.

On Thursday workshop days during the spring of 2017, Ecumen residents trickle in to their usual seats around a long table and set down their crisp, colorful notebooks. As organizers of the workshop, Jenna Hooper and I are waiting at the ready, having integrated readings, suggestions from classmates, and the context of the challenges of senior living homes into our workshop goals. We hand out stacks of photographs to inspire memory-based writing. This prompts one resident to recall his time in Iwo Jima, and another to describe the smell of her mother's freshly baked cinnamon rolls because, "we didn't think about calories back then." In four sessions, this storytelling program hosts approximately ten residents for collaborative writing.

During Writing and Nonprofits class, it is easy to see the connection between my service at Ecumen and learning about the dire future for the aging population, especially for those in rural areas. We read articles and have discussions about elderly social isolation, and how it leads

to decline in both physical and mental health. One glance at Ecumen's monthly calendar of activities ranging from excursions into St. Peter, to bingo, to crafting projects, proves the immense effort to combat this problem. However, it becomes apparent as Jenna and I drive to Ecumen, that even geographically, it is isolated from the greater community. The challenge to create an inter-generational community is evident. Statistics about rural senior isolation comes alive while visiting Ecumen.

Our Stories creates a community for Ecumen residents, encouraging collaboration among residents and students from our class. Stories fill the space around the table: stories of raising kids on a college campus, working on car engines, or the family snowmobile business emerge in notebooks as the hour passes.

As the session draws to a close, residents read a portion of what they have written. One resident, who brought photos to help him remember, passes them around the table so everyone can understand the complicated mechanical work he once did. One resident shows a printed booklet of her own memory-based story collection.

"It's my life story, so my kids and grandkids will know where they come from," she shares to the group. Four sessions do not begin to summarize the joys and hardships of the Ecumen residents, but it captures important memories they can share in the present and preserve for their family's future generations.

Jenna and I gather extra pens and paper as the residents head downstairs to lunch, still swapping stories. We return to class with the latest Ecumen updates, and receive ideas from our classmates on how to improve the workshop. Our Stories is just a few hours of thousands in these resident's lives, but I leave filled with stories of a different time (a time when carbs didn't matter?) and an appreciation of the thoughtful and creative Ecumen senior citizens.