Yovana Gojnic shares a laugh with Eskaton Henson Manor neighbor Donnell Johnson. Gojnic lives in the senior community as part of the Eskaton/CSUS Student Living and Learning Experience project. —Courtesy photo

CSUS Gerontology Student Lives Her Homework

By Stuart Greenbaum
Guest Contributor

Who wants to experience being old while they are still young? Some individuals have good reasons for wanting to learn by living it. Such experiential learning has been attempted in various controlled environments, with varying degrees of commitment and results.

The most original of these experiences, at least when measured by endurance, comes from a partnership established this past year between nonprofit aging-services provider Eskaton and California State University, Sacramento’s gerontology program to conduct what is being referred to as immersion research.

Before launching the officially titled "Eskaton/CSUS Student Living and Learning Experience," the project’s co-developers critiqued several conceptually similar projects. Each was noteworthy, but none approached the scale being considered by the two Northern California institutions.
PREMATURE AGING EXPERIENCES
For a few minutes: Younger generations can get in touch with the feelings of older adults when they, as singer Joe South urged, “Walk a Mile in My Shoes.” Aging institutes test assistive living devices and nursing schools attempt to teach empathy by conducting simulations with modified shoes and gloves to challenge motor skills, and smeared glasses and ear mufflers to imitate sensory impairment.

For 24 hours: Progressive architecture and interior design firms occasionally assign staff members to spend the night in a skilled nursing community to better understand a pending project’s unique characteristics.

For a month: The mature market branding firm, Varsity, directed “Project Looking Glass,” which placed several researchers in a Boulder, Colo., retirement community for one month. The goal: “uncover mind-sets, lifestyles, life stages, limitations and expectations of today’s mature market.” The open source project shared the experience on YouTube and various other digital media.

For a summer: 20-something filmmaker Andrew Jenks produced a documentary “Room 335” about the summer he spent living among 300 older adults, in their seventies and eighties, in a retirement community in Florida. The alternately entertaining and poignant film shows, as Jenks describes, “how young people can give something back to those who came before them, emphasizing the point that older people still have much to offer society.”

For six months: Similar to “Room 335,” comedy writer/author Rodney Rothman took up residency in a retirement community in Florida for about six months. He chronicled his experience in his book “Early Bird. The “early retirement” odyssey in Boca Rotan for the 28-year-old former staff writer for David Letterman is, as expected, a humorous and occasionally bittersweet take on infiltration of the residential and cultural aspects of aging.

For one year ... and counting: Yovana Gojnic lives among her neighbors at Eskaton Henson Manor in Sacramento, who share many common interests — cooking, gardening, reading, and volunteering on projects with local school children. So it isn’t all that surprising in 12 months’ time (Nov. 2011 - Nov. 2012) how effortlessly Gojnic has connected with fellow residents. Except that the ages of the other 90-100 residents range from two to three times that of 29-year-old Gojnic.

CSUS and Eskaton Collaboration
How did it happen that the youngish Gojnic became embedded in this older adult community?

The practical objectives of the Student Living and Learning Experience are for the Master’s level gerontology student to earn coursework credits — over a two-semester or one-year period — while providing support services and conducting applied research. The bigger picture purpose, facilitated by Eskaton’s public relations department, is for innovative “immersion service and learning” to serve as a prototype for replication within gerontology education and the aging services profession.

Eskaton’s goals for the project, predetermined to help inform the daily activities of the student’s involvement, included:

• Produce a mutually beneficial educational experience for the CSUS gerontology student and all residents of Eskaton Henson Manor.

• Infuse Eskaton Henson Manor with new programs, and engage residents with new purpose.

• Demonstrate the benefits of intergenerational connections on physical and mental health, safety and general well-being.
• Showcase the value of intentional generativity — one generation helping another.

With the history of successful collaboration between the University and Eskaton, the initial idea for the project came together comparatively quickly, with both institutions confident the results would prove mutually beneficial. Eskaton already hosts regular rotations of gerontology student internships in its skilled nursing centers and CSUS gerontology courses hosts Eskaton executives as guest presenters.

Of course as Peter Drucker reminds us, “All grand strategies eventually deteriorate into work.” Upfront, some logistical, insurance and legal issues needed to be resolved. Foremost, it was necessary to confirm that it was within government regulations for a young adult to reside in the government-regulated community. Of Eskaton’s 28 communities, Eskaton Henson Manor is the only “55+ age-restricted community,” which by law requires 80 percent of residents to be 55 or older. (This contrasts with Eskaton’s 15 federal HUD-subsidized affordable housing projects, which limit residency to individuals ages 62 and older.)

Letters went out to all residents explaining the unprecedented project, seeking their advance approval — which was forthcoming. A follow-up letter and an article in the community newsletter officially welcomed new resident Yovana Gojnic.

The invitation to gerontology and nursing students from Cheryl Osborne, director of the CSUS gerontology program, announced: “Are you interested in a lifetime opportunity? Live among people who have ‘been there, done that’ and fast forward your wisdom.” The appeal attracted considerable interest in its inaugural year, and has even prompted requests for a second student experience in 2013.

Once the candidate was selected, Eskaton extended Gojnic a discount on the monthly rent for her one-year commitment to the project. From CSUS, she earned coursework credits toward her special Master’s in gerontology and public policy and administration.

Getting involved in something new and different is well within Gojnic’s wheelhouse. Already her diverse past experience includes serving in the U.S. Marine Corps and assisting in elementary school classrooms. And then as this project began, she was simultaneously immersed in her gerontology studies; working full-time as an office assistant; and training for a statewide fitness and figure competition.

In contrast to her ambitious, fast-paced lifestyle, Gojnic offered an initial assessment of her new surroundings: “My neighbors love to go for walks, visit, bake, and work their garden. Enjoying a more balanced lifestyle, with healthier ‘time management,’ may be the most important thing I learn during this experience.”

THE WORK AND PROGRESS
To Gojnic’s credit, construction of two raised planter boxes doubled the production of the Henson residents’ popular urban garden. She coordinated a Veterans Day event and occasionally entertains the residents with her singing. Cooking demonstrations, programs on nutrition and healthy eating, walking groups, computer training and book clubs have also flourished with her assistance.

“I have enjoyed the opportunity to observe the experiences shared by Yovana and the other residents during this past year,” said Donna Garrett, Eskaton Henson Manor’s administrator. “We are definitely bridging generations with this project.”

Especially valuable has been the anecdotal research Gojnic has gathered by engaging her older neighbors with thought-provoking questions, including:

What do you think of me a younger person (me) living among older adults?

What impression did you have of older adult communities before you moved here?
What do you find yourself spending more time thinking about: your past, the present or your future?

“To survive, let alone succeed, in a career in gerontology and especially aging services, requires a very genuine passion for working with older adults,” explained Teri Tift, Eskaton’s director of quality and compliance. “What Yovana is really learning about herself and others from this hands-on experience ... is worth its weight in textbooks.” Tift’s commitment to intergenerational living can be traced to her Action Learning Project for the LeadingAge Leadership Academy in 2011.

Gojnic’s weekly journal entries chronicling her experiences and epiphanies, academic learning experiences and work-study activities offer an authentic glimpse into the experience, warts and all. Additionally, regular debriefings were held with Gojnic and the project’s advisory team: Cheryl Osborne, director, gerontology program, CSUS; Donna Garrett, administrator, Eskaton Henson Manor; Teri Tift, director of quality and compliance, Eskaton; and CSUS gerontology professor Stuart Greenbaum, vice president, public relations and brand management, Eskaton.

This experience may be a precursor to the natural evolution of intergenerational living. It may also establish a precedent for replicable, practical research in gerontology. Or, it may simply be an exercise in acceptance and understanding for Gojnic and her neighbors at Eskaton Henson Manor. Just as it will take time to harvest the bounty of the community’s new urban garden, it will take time to realize the results of this experiment.

Yovana Gojnic’s 2012 Journal Excerpts

By Yovana Gojnic

“My goal is to hopefully enrich the lives of the residents here as much as they enrich mine.”

3-13-12 — I’ve had a lot of mixed emotions since I moved in, but things are starting to change for the better.

3-22-12 — It is late at night and I’m tired of the screaming from across the hall by the lady’s daughter and her boyfriend.

5-8-13-12 — Went walking around the community with Dale, Donnell, John and Joyce. Donnell was a Marine. He’s so funny and loves cookies.

6-18-12 — Sometimes I dread coming home because I don’t want to talk to anyone and certain residents always want to talk forever. ... Once I do talk to the residents I feel better because they really like me and I know they just want to socialize.

7-19-12 — I know this is a great experience for me and that this truly is the field I want to be in ... I’ve learned in gerontology how important social connections and relationships are to age successfully.
7-25-12 — The people across the hall got evicted! Woo!! ... Started reading the book Early Bird ... I am going to get a lot of good ideas and insights. I would like to find out from the residents, "Is retirement what you expected?" "Do you feel more comfortable being in a neighborhood with all older adults?" I also want to know how many feel isolated; what sorts of things do they do every day to stay occupied. I wonder how many residents may be depressed.

8-4-12 — Just got back from having breakfast with Dale. We went to Waffle Square at 7 a.m. Haha! When ... I go to breakfast with friends or family it's always around 10 a.m.

8-10-12 — Went to the resident meeting today and the ice cream social. ... Nice to chat with residents who I haven't spoken to that much. ... I am making a conscious effort to participate in more activities at Henson.

9-13-12 — Key insights I got from Faye. She is mainly around people with no more zest for life, who are just waiting to die. She says that nine out of ten people around here always talk about how "sick" they are and it's annoying to go to activities because they're only talk about their ailments. I asked her what she thought about me living here. She said she objected at first because she thought of college kids partying and not being quiet. She's good with it now though. She likes senior living because there are no loud kids and it's pretty quiet.

9-21-12 — Some interesting things I am learning from a couple interviews this week. One resident told me the most important thing I can learn from older generations is to listen to their life experiences. That it would save me time, money and heartache. Also, she advised, to not let anyone get started on their medical problems because I would be there all day. I asked about worries: Not being able to drive anymore, outlasting money, don't want to be a burden on children, want to die quickly with no suffering.

9-27-12 — One resident said when she was younger she swore she would never live in a senior community. She said that she chose to live here mainly because it is so pretty. She would have chosen to live here even if it wasn’t a senior community.

10-21-12 — I have learned a lot about myself this year. I’m really excited about the direction I plan to go with my career ...