

# Life Stories volunteers preserve seniors' experiences for families

By Richie Rathsack, Record-Journal staff



Donna Storm, coordinator of the Life Stories project for the Southington Care Center, looks at the completed book of an elderly patient at the Jerome Home in New Britain. Matt Andrew / Record-Journal

SOUTHINGTON — Though the life of a homemaker in the 1930s or 1940s doesn't seem like the most interesting of stories for those that experienced it, family members come to tears after hearing and seeing the lives their parents or grandparents lived in a time much different from their own.

A little more than a year ago, volunteers began training to document the life stories of seniors at Central Connecticut Senior Health Services facilities. On Friday, several volunteers and guests sat down to compare notes and work on ways to continue the project.

For sisters Arlene Donahue of New Britain and Carol DiLorenzo of Southington, the project allowed them to get to know their mother in a way they never thought possible.

"The first book we did was on our mother. It brought us so much closer to her by doing this," Donahue said. Funding for the project comes through a grant by AmeriCorps in Eldercare Settings as part of a national Life Stories effort. Volunteers interview seniors and their families, gather pictures from throughout their lives and then compile books for the families to keep. In Southington, the book also comes with a DVD containing a photo slideshow and narration by the interviewee.

The finished books come in a variety of shapes, sizes and styles. Some of the finished books are hard covers, featuring many pictures and text narration. Others look more like a scrapbook, with plastic page coverings making the pages less susceptible to coffee spills and other hazards.

As the volunteers looked over each other's work, they got new ideas. Volunteers reported seeing the project benefit the elderly and their families in a multitude of ways. For seniors with dementia or Alzheimer's disease, reminiscing through old photographs about times they can still remember helps them maintain social relationships, said Marie Olson, Life Stories coordinator at Mulberry Gardens in Southington.

"Reminiscing really helps them with conversations. It helps keep their minds active, remembering things from their past," Olson said while sitting with Southington Care Center Life Stories Coordinator Donna Storm.

Staff working with the seniors also use the books to get to know them on a personal basis and even noticed the books calm down seniors going through rough patches to see familiar sights from their lives. The coordinators said working with some of the seniors can be challenging, particularly because many don't think their lives are worth documenting. Once the interviews are completed, however, she said the families of the seniors tend to get teary-eyed while learning new things about their parents or just from reliving some of their loved ones' memorable moments with them.

Mary Allen, a resident at Jerome Home in New Britain, was one of the first seniors to take part in the project. "I enjoyed doing it with the nice young lady. I got one of the books for each of my children to have," Allen said. "I thought, 'They're friendly and they're smiling. Why not do it?' It will be a good thing to give to the children. Down the road it will mean a lot to them."

Karen Revitt, project manager for the Connecticut Region and administrator of the grant, sat jotting notes as the volunteers shared their tales. "It's amazing how individual all the books are, yet there are the similarities because of common events," Revitt said.

Because of the success of the books, she was able to justify an extension of the grant for a third year. With another year of funding, the coordinators will be seeking out additional volunteers to continue the project, said Erika Copes, director of marketing and business development for Central Connecticut Senior Health Services.