

UC San Diego

# UC San Diego News Center

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## Learning From Our Elders With a Twist (and Shout)

*Life Course Scholars program brings together generations at 'Senior Prom' and more*



*Queen Marie and King John at "Senior Prom," hosted by UC San Diego Life Course Scholars at Serving Seniors' downtown center. Photos by Erika Johnson/UC San Diego Publications*

**M**usic blasted and streamers sparkled as a roomful of partyers turned to watch their Prom King and Queen take the floor for their first dance. Some of the watchers soon joined the fun on the linoleum to strut their stuff too. Others preferred to stick close to the tables and the comforts of conversation. It was a prom much like any other, except it wasn't in a high

school gym, and the joyous faces of the revelers sported more wrinkles than pimples. This was a “Senior Prom” at Serving Seniors’ Gary and Mary West Senior Wellness Center in downtown San Diego—organized by UC San Diego students in the Life Course Scholars program for the center’s age 60-and-up crowd.

The prom at downtown’s West Center is just one of a number of activities that bring together the Life Course Scholars from UC San Diego with elders in the community for innovative learning outside the classroom. A similar event is held at the Casa de Mañana in La Jolla. There’s also Zumba at the Bayside Community Center in Linda Vista. There are visits to senior housing around town, from luxurious buildings to single-room-occupancy hotels that charge weekly and monthly rates. There are walking neighborhood assessments and oral history projects. And the list goes on.

Now in its in third year, the changemaking Life Course Scholars program is a two-quarter sequence of classes that seeks to transform students’ “understanding of aging, health, learning and research, as well as connect them more deeply to the people and places” of San Diego.

Initially piloted with a grant from the university’s Healthy Aging Initiative, Life Course Scholars is now supported by the Urban Studies and Planning program in the Division of Social Sciences at UC San Diego. It is co-directed by Urban Studies lecturers Leslie Lewis and Mirle Rabinowitz-Bussell.

“If we’re lucky, we’re all old people in training,” Lewis said. It was clear from the start to her and Bussell that “rather than just lecture at students,” they wanted to take them out into different communities in San Diego. Students would learn about the diversity of the aging experience through hands-on interaction with elders.

“Our most powerful learning comes in the context of relationship,” Lewis said. “There’s so much wisdom and learning out in the world, not just from people with letters after their names.”

Lewis earned a Ph.D. in cultural and psychological anthropology from UC San Diego, after receiving a master’s in public health from the University of Massachusetts. Bussell is a planner and architect by training, with a doctorate in urban planning from UCLA. The program the two women run is interdisciplinary by design.



*The Serving Seniors Singers moved the prom crowd to sing with them: “I don’t care what they say/I won’t stay in a world without love.”*

“From a planning perspective,” Bussell said, “we haven’t done a very good job with aging. There’s literature from the 1970s and that’s about it. We need to look at our built environment and make sure our communities are age-friendly.”

Every day, more than 10,000 Baby Boomers in the U.S. turn 65. That’s been happening every day since 2011 and will continue to for the next decade-plus. By 2030, according to population projections from the Pew Research Center, fully 18 percent of the nation will be at least that age.

This demographic reality, what Urban Studies and Planning Director Keith Pezzoli calls the “coming grey tsunami,” forms the backdrop of the Life Course Scholars program. What drives the program is a related question: Are we, as a society, doing everything we can to create environments that work for older people?

“We are an aging population and seniors tend to get overlooked,” Bussell said.

Lewis—who describes herself as being “very interested in systems of inequality and marginalized populations” (and who spent at least part of her time at the West Center prom making sure people got some Mardi Gras beads if they wanted them)—said that the program also takes a “hard look at the systems and social structures we create, at ageism and how that manifests in our consumer culture, at how lives are shaped by where we land in the socioeconomic matrix.



*Students and elders join hands to dance at prom – and to work on healthy aging solutions.*

“I hope Life Course Scholars pushes our students,” she said, “to think: ‘What do we do as citizens in a democracy so all elders, and all people across the life course, can flourish?’”

Bussell is encouraged by what she sees in the Life Course Scholars. “After two and half years of doing this program, it looks like our future is very bright—we are in very good hands,” she said.

In addition to being deliberately interdisciplinary, Life Course Scholars is also deliberately small. It is open to undergraduates throughout campus, but students must apply to be a part of it. The program’s sweet spot, Lewis and Bussell say, is right around 15 students.

“We have a wonderful little learning community here,” said Lewis, “with a lot of interaction, a lot of conversation and weekly reflections through blogging. (You can read the students’ blog posts [here](#).)

Separately, junior Jacqueline Brinkmann, who is majoring in Urban Studies, echoes Lewis’s comment about the learning community fostered by Life Course Scholars. “Everyone is getting to be really good friends,” she said, as she served out fruit at the West Center and poured drinks.

Brinkmann, who thought she wanted to be a teacher and work with kids, is now seriously considering working with the elderly instead. She speaks with excitement about the Healthy Aging projects that she and others in her cohort will be working on soon. But first, she said, she needs to pick a place and find out what that community actually needs.

It’s easy to go someplace with “your own idea” and impose what you think is best, Brinkmann said, “but I’ve learned a lot from Professor Lewis about proper ethical community engagement.”

“We need more focus on lessons people have already learned,” said Brinkmann. “There’s so much you can learn from older people—we just need to sit down and take the time to listen. I like to talk. I talk a lot. But this program has taught me a lot about listening and about engaging.”



*As part of the program, Life Course Scholars check out affordable senior housing options in San Diego. Photo courtesy Leslie Lewis.*

Intense listening and the perspectives that students from diverse majors bring to the program will result, if the past is any guide, in a slew of very different final Healthy Aging projects. Students in prior years have assessed Balboa Park for its age-friendliness, investigated HIV infection among older people (because, yes, seniors have sex), and proposed walking programs and community gardens. In fact, the idea for holding a “Senior Prom” came from a Healthy Aging Project in the program’s first year.

Meanwhile, scholars from the program’s second year have launched a new student volunteer organization on campus called Grand Partners in Service. And Jadzia Nguyen-Khoa, who is a human biology major and part of Grand Partners, also continues to be affiliated with Life Course Scholars program this year, Lewis said, as “an ambassador and undergrad T.A.” There’s a good chance Nguyen-Khoa will end up working with the elderly later on, too.



*The photo booth was popular with both students and seniors.*

The same can probably be said of Jeong Hoon (John) Kim, who is part of the 2018 cohort and a junior in biochemistry. Kim has known for a while, he said, that he enjoys talking with older people, ever since he loved interacting with his late grandfather, but he still credits the program with opening his eyes in a variety of ways. “I’m much more aware of the elderly in San Diego now,” he said. And at the West Center, he’s struck in particular by the differences he observes between people’s enjoyment of the prom there and the one at Casa de Mañana. At the West Center, more

than 85 percent of the clientele live below the federal poverty line. He knew this. But seeing it is different. “It’s not just something you can learn from a textbook,” he said, still flushed from dancing in a circle with seniors and fellow students.

At the West Center, standing not far from Kim is John A. Currie, 73. He’d missed his own prom in the 1960s. But today he was crowned Prom King, and he’s visibly pleased: “This was very nice.”

Not an hour before, one of the afternoon’s more moving moments at the West Center featured the Serving Seniors Singers. The group turned out a couple of numbers *a cappella*, including Stevie Wonder’s “A Place in the Sun.” To cheers and murmurs, the singers belted out:

“Cause there's a place in the sun  
Where there's hope for everyone  
Where my poor restless heart's got to run  
There's a place in the sun  
And before my life is done  
Got to find me a place in the sun.”