

UNH Students Helping Care for Seacoast Families Affected by Alzheimer's Disease

By [Sharon Keeler](#)
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DURHAM, N.H. -- A University of New Hampshire program is pairing students with families in the Seacoast area who need a little help caring for seniors with Alzheimer's disease.

Raelene Shippee-Rice, UNH professor of nursing, and Ann Kelley, associate professor emerita of nursing, developed the program because they recognized that the university and its students could play a valuable role in assisting state residents with home-based care of family members with Alzheimer's or other cognitive impairment. A \$15,000 grant from the Seacoast Foundation for Healthy Communities made the pilot program possible.

"We call it an 'in-home friendly visit' program," says Shippee-Rice. "The goal is for students to spend time with the older adult, so the primary caregiver can run errands, attend an event, go the gym, whatever. It's the type of program where everyone benefits. We're reaching people who need the services, and students are learning from the experience."

Jamie Largeant of Enfield, a student in the program, says that the experience has given her a new outlook and a "more holistic view of the person. As a nursing student, it's easy to get caught up in the technical procedures like IVs and passing meds," she says. "Becoming directly involved with the family helped me learn to focus on communication and listening skills, and come up with creative solutions."

The "friendly visit" initiative branched from a project Shippee-Rice leads along with colleague Jeffrey Eaton, assistant professor of nursing. This project, funded by a

community grant from the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services Health Care Transition Fund, is designed to improve early intervention and access to care for older adults, and provide family support, education and training that will result in the use of cost-efficient community services.

One in 10 people over 65 years of age, and nearly half of those over 85, have Alzheimer's disease. Caregivers are especially affected by this disease. In a national survey, 19 million Americans said they have a family member with Alzheimer's disease.

"What we've learned through the early stages of this project is that families need in-home respite care," says Shippee-Rice. "VNAs and homemakers provide this care, but it's limited and costly. Families stressed a need for support, especially during the evenings and on the weekends."

Nine UNH students are involved in the program, and are providing care for families in the Seacoast area who were identified by community organizations. The students, who come from various majors within UNH's School of Health and Human Services, begin by enrolling in a course on family care and older adults, which is team-taught by Shippee-Rice and Kelley. They also participate in training sessions where they learn about respite care and Alzheimer's disease.

The Cotillos of Portsmouth are one of the families benefiting from the program. Raymond, who is a "youthful" 90 years of age, cares for his wife Helen, whom he wed in 1936. He doesn't complain. He says he married the girl of his dreams, raised three great kids, and had a successful career.

"The Alzheimer's has been bad for the last year and a half," he says. "But I guess we're luckier than some. People are getting it in their 50s and 60s."

Cotillo says he is fortunate to have his kids around to help care for his wife, but the UNH students provide him with that "extra time" for himself. It means, among other things, that he can take a night off to play cards with his friends, knowing that his wife is in good hands. "Oh, it's helped me tremendously," he says.

"The experience was wonderful," says Cora Beaudry of Hollis, who was placed with the Cotillos last semester. "I'd help make meals and do Helen's nails. We'd listen to music -- she loves Frank Sinatra. For Ray, you could see his stress level drop.

"As a gerontology minor, I really wanted to learn more about the home care environment," Beaudry says. "It gave me more experience on how Alzheimer's affects the family and the individual."

Shippee-Rice says her long-term goal is to get other colleges and universities in the state involved in similar programs within their communities.

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