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UI senior Mike Carrero hugs Doris Hughes at the Oaknole Retirement Community on Monday, Nov. 29, 2010. Carrero and others helped Doris complete a family tree dating back to the 1600's as part of the project "Unfinished Business" which allowed seniors to finish something that was on their "bucket-list".

Students help seniors with 'Bucket List' items

BY [HAYLEY BRUCE](#) | NOVEMBER 30, 2010 7:20 AM

Doris Hughes may be 85, but she still has some unfinished business.

For years, she had wanted to make a scrapbook of her family history back to the Civil War. She had the information and photos, some more than 150 years old. But the University of Iowa 1947 alumna and former academic adviser needed some help completing the books in time to give them to her children and grandchildren for Christmas.

That's where the students stepped in.

UI interdepartmental-studies coordinator David Gould recognized there were many senior citizens like Hughes in Iowa City who needed a little help accomplishing some of the last things on their to-do lists.

This semester, Gould and Lindsey Payton, a recreation therapist at Oaknoll Retirement Community, organized the Unfinished Business Project to match residents with leisure-studies students.

Hughes was one of six chosen this semester to take part in the interactive experiment between UI students and senior citizens. Throughout the semester, students met with the seniors to work on their chosen projects. On Monday, they gathered to celebrate the completion of their tasks.

Festively dressed in a bright red sweater, 87-year-old Grace Olmsted adjusted her glasses and explained that she went into the project hoping to learn how to use the computer.

"All of my children have computers and Internet, and they do e-mail," she said. "I thought I could maybe send them e-mails if I learned how."

Now, she can not only send her family e-mails, she can use Microsoft Word and navigate the web. She's even hoping to get into online shopping.

Samantha Saltzman — a geriatric nursing student at the UI who was paired with Olmsted — said she felt the project was beneficial for those who partook.

"You learn so much from seniors," she said. "Even in the process of getting together and doing activities together, conversations come up, words of wisdom come up, and you learn how they lived their lives and how it's different from now, and it's really an amazing experience."

Overall, Gould said, a dual learning environment was his goal.

"The students had an opportunity to really get to know these seniors, know their stories, and see how their life is acted out in the final stages," he said. "And those become models they can carry with them when they have their own journey."

This fall was the first time Gould and his class conducted the Unfinished Business Project, which was inspired by his friend and colleague Gene Cohen, who studies different phases people go through in life.

The project deals with a phase many reach toward the end of life, when people begin to evaluate their accomplishments and what they have yet to do.

"I got the idea of, What if we took the energy of college students, the vitality, the ideas of college students, and matched them with seniors to help them check some of those things off their 'bucket list'?" Gould said.

But some seniors' initial dreams were too difficult to accomplish this semester.

Lois Muehl, a 90-year-old published author, said the first item she wanted to check off her bucket list was hang gliding.

But eager to work with students, she instead settled on learning computer skills she hoped would aid her writing career and allow her to submit her poetry to online publications. At the end of the semester, Gould asked the seniors to give their student partners advice.

"I didn't feel all that competent about giving them advice," Muehl said. "But I did give them a four-line poem."

It was called "How to reach 90."