

John Dahlia - Good News - Eye-opening elderly access to food investigation shines bright light on serious problem

by John Dahlia, EDITOR | Posted: Tuesday, October 27, 2015 12:30 am

An issue many people in Preston County, and quite possibly, West Virginia take for granted is simple access to food. A unique and eye-opening project conducted by the WVU School of Public Health and senior citizens in Preston County is shining a bright light on a serious problem.

The initiative, or more appropriately, investigation is called the Preston County Senior Citizens Photovoice Project. According project lead Lauri Andress, Ph.D., the main idea behind her work stems from the fact that the elderly in general, have problems with nutrition.

“And the problems are not just about their knowledge of what they eat, it’s also about the conditions under which they live,” Dr. Andress explained. “And we’re trying highlight how community conditions shape nutrition.”

Participants were asked to take photos related to five dimensions of food access: Availability, accessibility, affordability, accommodation and acceptability. With the photos, researchers and community members are able to see concrete evidence of issues with food access and security in the county.

“The photos taken by the seniors serve the same purpose as a survey or needs assessment,” Dr. Andress said. “We think that use of the Photovoice method, instead of a traditional survey, brings the issue of food security to light in a vivid way and empowers participants to take a lead on the issue and have their voices heard.”

Researchers interviewed the senior photographers so they could further explain their stories and talk about their concerns regarding food availability and access in Preston County.

One of those senior photographers was former Rowlesburg mayor and postmaster Margaret Schollar who said she got involved mainly because she wanted to help.

“For 85 years old I’m pretty good,” Schollar admitted. “But I know there are people who are having a lot of trouble getting food and I have compassion so I wanted to help.”

Schollar’s photos were mainly of the Rowlesburg Food Pantry where she volunteers with her sister.



Lauri Andress, Ph.D., left, and Margaret Schollar, right

Lauri Andress, Ph.D., left, and Margaret Schollar, right, of Rowlesburg have a conversation about the project. Schollar submitted several photos used in the Preston County Senior Citizens Photovoice Project.

Her assistance also included details on a problem most people take for grant: the ability to actually get to or access the food at the store and get it home.

“I can get my groceries in a car but I can’t get up on the bus with a bag of groceries,” Schollar said. “And if I’m having a problem at 85 imagine what other people in worse off shape are having.”

“We found the elderly are having trouble getting into the stores and reaching up or reaching down for food,” Dr. Andress added. “When they get the groceries home they are too tired. Then you have elderly who are ill or shut-ins and might not eat for days.”

The project also included a comprehensive video which included interviews and imagery from the seniors who participate. Dr. Andress said the next steps will be to take the video they developed and show it around Preston County.

“We want to be involved in future community discussion about this issue,” she said.

Funding for this unique project was generously provided by the Caroline Haase Trust. Other project collaborators include Preston County Senior Citizens, Inc., Preston County Family Resource Network, Preston Memorial Hospital and the Preston County Health Department. The project was put on display at the Preston Community Arts center in Kingwood, Friday, Oct. 23.