

Emily Duda: Advancing the Quality of Life for Seniors

by Sharon Crane

Emily Duda entered her freshman year at Virginia Tech with few concrete plans for her education. She knew she wanted to work with people and thought she might want to become a doctor. She came from a close-knit family and had a special relationship with a much-admired and inspiring grandfather who, at age 90, still engaged in downhill skiing and took the stairs rather than the escalator. Putting it all together, Duda

thought that the Department of Human Development in the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences seemed like a good place to start.

During her undergraduate years, Duda found a staunchly supportive mentor in Associate Professor Shannon Jarrott, who recognized her student's passion and potential and provided access to several learning experiences that further deepened Duda's interest in social issues. With Jarrott's guidance and support, Duda served as a research assistant, planned and implemented programs for intergenerational participants at Virginia Tech's on-campus Adult Day Services, and took part in a 2008 study abroad experience in Sweden.

"Being immersed in Swedish culture led me to consider how quality of life in long-term care is impacted immensely by the physical environment, roles of direct-care staff, and overall perceptions about aging," Duda said. Her experiences and observations while abroad found her challenging her own ideas on how elder care is approached

in the U.S. and encouraging ideas on how "what we've always done" might be changed for the better.

After earning her undergraduate degree, Duda pursued a gerontology certificate, during which time she read about a technical assistance arm of NCB Capital Impact called the Green House Project, a model of senior living with the primary goal of creating a supportive environment for late-life growth and development. Duda was intrigued and, within a month of earning her gerontology certificate, began her career as project manager where she delivered technical assistance and training to long-term care providers and grassroots organizations implementing the Green House model.

"I left Virginia Tech not only with knowledge in my field, but also with skills that are applicable and relevant in any professional setting," said Duda. She points to the strong focus on development of interpersonal skills needed to build strong relationships and resolve conflict. "In studying people throughout the lifespan, I grew a stronger appreciation for the strengths that each individual brings at every stage of life," she said.

After three years, Duda saw a new opportunity to support her field, and she accepted program manager responsibilities with the Retired & Senior Volunteer Program in January. Although still settling into her new position, she is excited to be venturing into this broad, new arena and eager to be part of another empowering opportunity for seniors as they provide volunteer support to the communities around them.

In her work, Duda believes that "as individuals and as a society, we should embrace our potential to change and grow until our last days of life." Clearly, her career calling brings such ideas to life.

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Equipped with undergraduate research experience, a meaningful study-abroad opportunity, and a certificate in gerontology, Emily Duda is focused on improving eldercare.

Kristen Duda

