



Trinh Bach, '08 Social Work, activity director at Jeanne d'Arc Manor, helps Cung Le with band exercises.



Social work undergrads Bridget Yanes (facing page, bottom right) and Van Nguyen (at left, in tie) work closely with residents to keep them active, engaged and healthy.

THE WORK of CHAMPIONS

PHOTOGRAPHY: SHARON HALL

RESEARCH, OUTREACH AND INTERVENTION KEEP OLDER ADULTS SHARP BOTH MENTALLY AND PHYSICALLY

WHEN 85-YEAR-OLD Cung Le started losing the feeling in her legs, it could have been the beginning of the end. Confined to a wheelchair, she began to withdraw from the community at Jeanne D'Arc Manor, an independent living facility for the elderly located just steps from the San José State campus. She rarely left her room.

"It was challenging because Mrs. Le is frail and was becoming increasingly isolated," says social work major Van Nguyen, who through his internship here works one-on-one with Le and other at-risk older adults. "I had to come up with a plan to get her out of her apartment."

Nguyen and fellow interns at Jeanne d'Arc are key players in San José State's Center for Healthy Aging in Multicultural Populations. The center, known as CHAMP and led by Social Work Associate Professor Sadhna Diwan, promotes healthy aging in diverse communities through research, partnerships and by providing training. The center's philosophy is to increase physical and psychological wellbeing among elders by promoting evidence-supported programs that focus on physical activity and social connectedness.

For Nguyen, involving Le with physical and social activity was key. Fortunately through Jeanne d'Arc's partnership with CHAMP, the facility's staff was already on board with the approach. Diwan and fellow

Social Work Assistant Professor Sang Lee had already completed an assessment of the facility's residents and their need for health promotion programs, and through their recommendations Jeanne d'Arc engaged SJSU's Tamar Semerjian, associate professor of kinesiology, to lead fall-prevention and exercise workshops. The facility's staff and interns were also trained by Toby Adelman, associate professor of nursing, in "laughter yoga"—a physical and social activity that breaks through language and cultural barriers.

Diversity issues including language and culture are a key focus for CHAMP. Diwan and Lee have focused much of their research on understanding stumbling blocks to healthy aging among diverse communities. At Jeanne d'Arc, they found the wide variety of languages to be a key challenge.

CHAMP is far more than a partner for a single independent living facility near campus, however. Ultimately, the faculty members, representing many different

disciplines on campus, are working to develop a healthier future for all older adults. They are researching the role of diversity within independent living communities, helping service providers understand evidence-based health promotion programs, and even helping facilities win grants for improving their programs.

The challenge, says Semerjian, is "breaking stereotypes about what older adults can do." She says that most activity programs developed for the elderly are not intensive enough. "Too often there are assumptions that older adults are too frail to do anything, about what kind of movements they can do, or that they can't or won't try something new," she says.

That was clearly not the case for Le, who is quick to demonstrate her mastery of the exercise band and who, thanks to Nguyen, has become a regular at the facility's social gatherings. "Before, she was always sleeping," says Le's home aide. "But now she has more energy." ♦

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