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Intro/Outro Speaker:

You're listening to Further Together, the ORAU podcast. Join Michael Holtz and his guests for conversations about all things ORAU. They'll talk about ORAU storied history, our impact on an ever-changing world, our innovative scientific and technical solutions for our customers, and our commitment to the communities where we do business. Welcome to Further Together, the ORAU podcast.

Michael Holtz:

Welcome to Further Together, the ORAU podcast. As ever, it is me, your host, Michael Holtz, from the communications and marketing department at ORAU and this episode is another in a series of episodes we've been doing on the Research and University Partnerships Office Innovation Partnerships Grant Program. And I have two guests with me from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, who put one of these grants to great use on a program around the concept of gerontology. And I'm going to have Dr. Elaine Jurkowski and Gevonna Fassett introduce themselves. And Dr. Jurkowski, if you'll go first please.

Dr. Elaine Jurkowski:

Thank you. Thank you so much for the opportunity to be with you today. My name, as you all heard, Dr. Jurkowski. I'm a professor in the social work department at Southern Illinois University Carbondale and I also oversee our gerontology programs. And so, this particular project we're going to talk about was really a partnership between academia and partners in the community. So we'll tell you more about it during this episode, but I'll let Gevonna introduce herself.

Gevonna Fassett:

I am a student working on my graduate degree in human science, and I will be getting a graduation certificate in gerontology. That's my connection to Dr. J, as I like to call her. And our event, it was called Destination Healthy Aging, that was part of my practicum, so it was a vision that I got a chance to see to fruition and Dr. J. and her partnership and her connection with people in the community and different organizations, we were able to bring it about. So I'm really excited what we were able to accomplish and we got a lot of good feedback, and we'll tell you more about that throughout this podcast.

Michael Holtz:

I'm looking forward to that. So just for folks who are listening, a quick overview of the Innovations Partnership Grant Program. It's basically a program that is designed to build or strengthen our relationships between university partners and ORAU collaborators. So we look for applications that focus on research and education topics that align with ORAU's expertise and current priorities. These tend to focus around events, workshops, and conferences that showcase a university's strategic growth areas and thought leadership in STEM research and education, workforce development, those sorts of things. And we really strongly encourage student participation in these events.

So each grant is valued at up to $4,000 with a maximum of two awards per year, two member universities. And, for those who are listening who might be interested, the call for FY25 applications is now open. And our focus areas for the coming fiscal year include improving behavioral health, including focuses on health equity, stress, and cultural approaches to healthcare as well as stigma, substance use disorders, and population health. Life in a post-pandemic world, which includes remote working and learning, organization and workforce resilience, and health communication among others.

Implementing innovative technologies, like data safety and cyber security, privacy, the digital divide, and the ethics of all of that. And then, a focus on our changing planet, which includes sustainability, environmental justice, clean energy, renewable energy, extreme weather events, like we're experiencing in this part of the country, and community resilience. So lots of topics. There's a full list on our website at orau.org and you can find out more about the program.

Dr. Elaine Jurkowski:

Great.

Michael Holtz:

So let's get started talking about Destination Healthy Aging and, Dr. Jurkowski, if you'll go first and just kind of talk about what this workshop was and what you set out to do.

Dr. Elaine Jurkowski:

Okay, certainly. Well, I want to start by saying, it's kind of interesting how all of this came together. I was brainstorming with a colleague of mine from our Paul Simon Public Policy Institute over lunch, a nice summer day in 2023, and we were trying to come up with some common ground of an area that we could do some work together. And our certificate program has tried to develop an educational conference for the last couple of years, and my colleague was very interested in this idea of how can we address some of the crucial issues for workforce within the older adult population?

So as she continued to talk, I could hear Gevonna's voice in the back of my mind, as well, because she had been saying almost the exact same things to me about what her vision was, in terms of trying to really engage caregivers, whether they be paid, unpaid, but primarily unpaid caregivers, that voice that we seldom hear about. So all these stars seemed to align, because at the same time I did see a notice come forward from our grants office about the ORAU funding opportunity. And so, I thought about it and thought, "Well, what the heck? I may as well apply. It can't hurt." And so, I did, but at the same time we were working full steam starting in the fall of last academic year to begin to prepare for a conference.

And Gevonna was very interested in using this as part of her practicum, as she mentioned, for her gerontology certificate, so it just seemed like a perfect kind of strategy to reach out. Now, Gevonna and the Public Policy Institute had visions of trying to look at how can we not only address caregiver needs, but address policy development for our workforce. So they had an angle, in terms of dealing with politicians and a vision around how to get some political connection to also tie to our agenda.

And I, of course, had this educational research piece in mind, because that's my forte, so through that, we were able to develop a daylong continuing education event that addressed caregiving, addressed the caregiver, addressed our workforce, talked about life after caregiving, talked about building communities that would be inclusive and age friendly for caregiving. We also addressed person-centered care and caregiving in place. That is, people remain in their own home and we figure out ways to strengthen the caregivers, so that they can do that job in helping that loved one stay in their home for as long as possible and even, hopefully, till they transition from this life.

And we also talked about some various other areas that were important as part of the caregiving process and things that we tend not to talk about, like substance abuse or misuse for caregivers, and how to care for the caregiver. Then we also talked about how to have an impact for caregiving resources through our legislators and through our community partners, which is something I think Gevonna will also share and talk about.

And through this process, through the generous funding of this grant, we were able to bring in some of my colleagues from other parts around the country, which made it really a very strong and robust evidence based type of program. And we were also able to bring a keynote speaker in through generous support from the AARP.

So the whole thing kind of just mushroomed and it was a really very beautiful and very, very robust kind of conference. And, as a result, we've been able to develop some new relationships with partners who are interested in doing some research and we've applied to several different grants, as a result of this. I think we've applied for four grants now off the relationships that forged through this grant and through this daylong seminar.

Michael Holtz:

That's amazing and caregiving is such a critical issue, especially for folks who are aging and I have some personal experience with this as my wife had been a caregiver for her mom, who just passed away about a month ago, but had been really in a nursing home for about the last two years of her life. And even when you're loved one is in care, as the primary caregiver, you still are the person focused on advocating for your patient and making sure your patient's okay and is your patient eating. Right? All the things that-

Dr. Elaine Jurkowski:

Absolutely.

Michael Holtz:

... go along with that. And she's now in that place, Dr. Jurkowski, that you talked about of life after caregiving, like what do you do?

Dr. Elaine Jurkowski:

[inaudible 00:12:27] yourself and how do you recreate yourself. Right.

Michael Holtz:

Yeah, what do you do now? And really, my wife had been a caregiver for 12 years. So I'm a cancer survivor and she was my caregiver when I was in treatment. And then, after I was finished with treatment, her dad became ill, and then, after that, her mom, so it's been like 12 years of-

Dr. Elaine Jurkowski:

Oh, wow. My goodness.

Michael Holtz:

... being in the caregiver hot seat. Right? And so, she really is trying to figure out what does life look like after-

Gevonna Fassett:

I took care of my mom, she had Alzheimer's for 11 years-

Michael Holtz:

Oh, wow.

Gevonna Fassett:

... and I do talks on life after caregiving, but what I encourage people to do is start thinking about your life after caregiving before you get to that place. Because when you get there, it's like you're at the end of a cliff, "Now what do I do?" So I encourage people to start planning beforehand.

Michael Holtz:

That makes sense.

Gevonna Fassett:

But it's not too late, but-

Michael Holtz:

No, sure.

Gevonna Fassett:

... now it's her time to do her thing, because she's been taking care of everybody else.

Michael Holtz:

That's right. So Gevonna, talk to me, I know this was part of your practicum, but talk to me about, and I recognize this is obviously personal as you were caregiver for your mom-

Gevonna Fassett:

That's okay, that's okay.

Michael Holtz:

... why this issue? I guess just talk about the personal drive behind this and what it meant to you to be part of pulling this event together, because it sounds like an amazing day.

Gevonna Fassett:

Well, my personal event and my person mantra in life, the rest of my days, I have this goal to make their last days, as I talk about the senior citizen, or the seasoned citizens, I like to say, their last days their best days. And usually what happens in life, they're going to have a caregiver. Rosalynn Carter, she says there are four kind of people, either you are a caregiver, you were a caregiver, you're going to be a caregiver, or you're going to need one. So somewhere in there, if you live long enough, there's a caregiver involved.

So, for me, I came here, I'm from Chicago, but I had an organization, I still have it, it's celebrating 10 years, it's called Olivia's Prayer and it's the place for caregivers and Alzheimer's awareness in the African-American community. The thing is, what I find, you talk about caregivers, the one thing that they mostly need is respite, so that was the goal of my organization, to provide and help them get respite and a place for them to go and just talk about their needs.

So here, in Carbondale, I was running into a lot of people who were caregivers, paid and unpaid caregivers, and with the assistance of Dr. Jurkowski, I was able to put together a program that I saw fit and Dr. J. said, "Well, Gevonna, that's more family caregiving." I said, "Well, you asked me." So she brought in the academic component to it, and then we were able to bring in paid caregivers, as well.

And, like I said, I go back, I'm so excited, the paid caregivers, the family caregivers, they both were able to get something out of it from the educational piece. And then, not only were the caregivers there, we had other people in different aspects of home care that were able to benefit from it, as well. So I was just [inaudible 00:16:07]. I mean, we had over 100 people, about 100. How many, Dr. J., did we have?

Dr. Elaine Jurkowski:

About 120 people.

Gevonna Fassett:

And so, it was just awesome, it was just awesome. So that's my personal part. I got involved years ago from taking care of my mother, and then I saw the need and I was able to provide that need when I lived in Chicago, and then I brought it here. And like I said, Dr. J. peppered in, not peppered in, she brought in the educational component to it that were able to serve an even larger group of people.

Michael Holtz:

It really sounds like a great day and I love that it did have both the personal, but also the academic focus.

Gevonna Fassett:

Yes.

Michael Holtz:

And I know, Gevonna, as a student, it certainly benefited you from a practicum perspective. Were other students involved in-

Gevonna Fassett:

Yes, yes.

Michael Holtz:

... basically participating in but also helping make the event happen?

Gevonna Fassett:

We had some gerontology students, nursing students, social work students. Who else did we have, Dr. J.?

Dr. Elaine Jurkowski:

I think we had a public health student participate.

Gevonna Fassett:

Yes. Yes, yes, yes. So it was well attended by students, as well. Students, caregivers-

Michael Holtz:

Professionals, academics.

Gevonna Fassett:

Professionals. Yes, yes, yes, yes.

Dr. Elaine Jurkowski:

We were also able to offer CEUs for social workers and nurses. So one of our partners that we have on board has a strong relationship with the Department on Aging, so through the Department on Aging and our state of Illinois we were able to offer CEUs, and so that was also a bonus for our professional workforce and that was helpful for people [inaudible 00:18:03]. Especially in our area, downstate, it can be difficult to find opportunities to be able to earn those CEUs, so people were grateful for that.

And I think the other thing that was really exciting about it all, is in addition to having that academic perspective and that human perspective tied in and we were also able to bring in the policy perspective. And through our Paul Simon Public Policy Institute, Gevonna worked with Dr. Linda Renee Baker, who was able to invite Terri Bryant, who is our state of Illinois lawmaker. And then, also, our lieutenant governor in a video welcome for the whole group.

Gevonna Fassett:

Okay. Well, she was saying to you that we were working with the Policy Institute. My other advisor was Dr. Linda Baker over at the Public Policy Institute and we were able to bring in Terri Bryant to participate, and then we also had an opening from our lieutenant governor, Juliana Stratton, so we had the political part. And then, that afternoon, we were able to do, which included Senator Terri Bryant, we did a legislative session. It was called Advocacy from the Grassroots Level.

Michael Holtz:

Oh, nice.

Gevonna Fassett:

And participants learned what they can do, what kind of caregiving legislation was going on at the time, and then gave them some practical strategies that they could implement to have their voice heard by the legislation to meet their needs. So we covered a lot of different areas that day.

Michael Holtz:

You sure did. It sounds amazing.

Dr. Elaine Jurkowski:

And I want to add that, in addition to all that, people got really very excited about the fact that they could participate from the grassroots level. And our AARP representative, who was with us-

Gevonna Fassett:

[inaudible 00:20:14]

Dr. Elaine Jurkowski:

... in the afternoon that day was able to recruit some people from the grassroots in caregivers to be able to help with some of that boots on the ground work.

Michael Holtz:

I love it. I did a lot of grassroots advocacy in the cancer space, so it's always nice when you hear other success stories. People, I think, often don't know how to get involved in the legislative advocacy part, and so having someone form AARP there who could explain, "Here's how this works and here's how you can get involved and here's what you can do," it makes a difference.

Dr. Elaine Jurkowski:

Yeah, absolutely. A couple of other notable pieces to that I thought really added to the magic of the day was our keynote speaker has been a caregiver herself, but runs a training initiative called The Caregiving Years Academy and she was really fantastic and she stayed for the day, so people were able to mingle with her, talk to her. She's just a very grassroots, down-to-earth person. But at the same time, she was able to connect with several of our academic colleagues, and so that's given us the opportunity to open up to do some caregiving research.

Gevonna Fassett:

That was Denise Brown, Denise M. Brown. I met her years ago in Chicago. She used to do caregiver workshops. I mean, they were really huge in Chicago, so I met her probably 10 years ago. And then, I was doing a piece at that time on the healthy caregiver, so I had an opportunity. So I wanted to bring her on, bring her here, so that was exciting when we got sponsorship and were able to get her here. And like Dr. J. said, there are some things that they've got coming up, so I'm excited. I'm just excited, once again, when I think about it. You can't see me smiling, but just the fact when I think about how the day went and the things we were able to accomplish.

Michael Holtz:

Well, and what I love is the kind of ripples that you have this one day, but that one day leads to research opportunities and it leads to relationships, so it's not just that one event, but we will know more about caregiving in the academic side of caregiving, but also the personal side of caregiving because of this one event that you all put together.

Gevonna Fassett:

Yes.

Dr. Elaine Jurkowski:

The presentation around life after caregiving was really impactful and people took it very personally and it was very emotional. So there was a lot of tears shed, because people could really related to the panelists. And they left with a sense of hope that there is something else that they could be doing, even while they're caregiving. They don't have to wait till their role is done as a caregiver. So I think that was a beautiful part, also, of the day that was a touching part, I think.

The other thing I wanted to share that I thought was also pretty cool is that it wasn't just the university. We did house this and host the conference on our university campus, but we partnered with a number of different groups in the community and that was also very helpful, because those groups were able to reach some populations and target people that we might not have thought about from the academic side. So, for example, we have a Southern Illinois Pioneer Coalition and their goal is to work with making that long-term care experience person-centered and person-first. And so, they have routinely put on trainings in the area, so they were very helpful in terms of the CEU component.

And we have the opportunity to do CEUs at the university, but I don't know, just having the Department on Aging give that stamp of approval made it that much more significant within the aging arena. And then, the other partner was the Illinois Coalition for Mental Health and Aging and this is a group that advocates for behavioral health amongst older adults and the workforce. So that group was statewide, which also then, I guess, pushed us to make the conference a hybrid event. So we also had people who participated from all across the state, because we were able to make it available through using a Zoom platform at the same time as having it face-to-face.

Michael Holtz:

That's great.

Dr. Elaine Jurkowski:

And, let's see. I don't know. There's a lot. It just seems like there was a lot that went into the day really.

Michael Holtz:

Well, it sounds like you had great speakers, you had great presentations, you had participation from across the state, and you had students and academics and actual personal and professional caregivers. I mean, it sounds like it literally had everything you could possibly want in an event designed for educating caregivers and academics in caregiving and gerontology. So it sounds amazing, and I just want to say, on behalf of ORAU, congratulations for a great event.

Dr. Elaine Jurkowski:

Oh, thank you. Well, we're so-

Gevonna Fassett:

Thank you, thank you.

Dr. Elaine Jurkowski:

... appreciative of ORAU being able to [inaudible 00:26:50] with the expenses and help us with that, because I don't think it could've been as strong and amazing had we not had that.

Michael Holtz:

Sure.

Dr. Elaine Jurkowski:

And you were also [inaudible 00:27:05]-

Gevonna Fassett:

Thank you.

Dr. Elaine Jurkowski:

... outcomes. So I wanted to share a few things with you. So we had our nursing faculty, we have a fairly new nursing program and their first cohort of students, I think, will graduate this upcoming year, but they brought a bunch of students and they are now all fired up and want to be in a planning group with us for a spring conference. And so, their students are planning to do some little breakout rooms where they have activities they can do with caregivers and with our workforce caregivers, to that's a pretty positive thing.

Michael Holtz:

Absolutely.

Dr. Elaine Jurkowski:

And I had mentioned some grant opportunities, so we have looked at some caregiving initiatives. We've looked at applying for some funds to help with community health workers who are caregivers. I am working with another faculty person right now who is trying to develop some introductory training for people in the workforce and she came to the daylong event and kind of connected with me, so the two of us are working on a proposal as we speak, that will go in in the next couple of weeks and have just applied fort a few different things that have come across our way.

And then, the idea of the substance use issues has led us to take a look at several caregivers talked about how they never ever [inaudible 00:28:53] using any kind of substances to help them relax, but as caregivers, they got into that. So we don't know much about that in the literature and in our research, so that's another thing that a few of us have banded together and we're starting to explore and will look for funding for our proof of concept around it. So quite a few things, actually, kind of spiraled out of this conference, which is really positive.

Michael Holtz:

That is really positive. Really great. Definitely continuing to have an impact beyond the day of the event itself.

Gevonna Fassett:

Yes, yes, yes.

Michael Holtz:

Which is important. Gevonna and Dr. J. is there anything we haven't talked about that you want to make sure that we cover?

Gevonna Fassett:

I think I'm okay. I think I've covered everything, but Dr. J. you might have something. I'm not certain.

Dr. Elaine Jurkowski:

I think we basically covered what we did and how we did it. I just want to leave on the note that opportunities like this really are not just about the day itself, but about the other relationships you can cultivate that can continue to foster opportunities for education, research, collaboration. I mean, I know that, for me, I developed several new partnerships as a result of the conference, and they're people that I might've come across and talked to or whatever, but just the very fact that we were all in the space and engaged in a theme and just the quality of the conference was very strong.

And I think those things combined together really help build those relationships that are so necessary in our world of academia to foster success. So I want to give a big shoutout to your organization, because it became very worthwhile and I know it's well appreciated on the receiver's end.

Michael Holtz:

And the impact is extraordinary. I mean, just hearing you talk about the impact, in terms of relationship building and cultivation and future research and future involvement of students. This is a train that isn't stopping any time soon.

Dr. Elaine Jurkowski:

Absolutely. Of course, it also stimulated interest in our certificate programs. That's also bolstered registration and engagement for people who want to continue learning about the field of gerontology, so it encompasses all those spaces.

Michael Holtz:

Right, right. Awesome. So successes all the way down. I love it. Well, Dr. J. and Gevonna, thank you so much for spending this time with me. I really appreciate learning about your program and how you put the IPG grant to use and I would love to maybe catch up with you in six months or so and see how things have grown from this event, so I'd love to learn more.

Dr. Elaine Jurkowski:

That sounds fantastic. Well, thank you so much.

Gevonna Fassett:

And thank you guys again. Thank you so much for your grant. We really, really appreciate that.

Michael Holtz:

Glad to do it.

Gevonna Fassett:

Yes, yes.

Dr. Elaine Jurkowski:

We very much appreciate it and we really appreciate the opportunity to brag a little bit about it.

Michael Holtz:

I love helping people brag about their grants, so thank you for taking the opportunity.

Gevonna Fassett:

All righty.

Michael Holtz:

Y'all have a-

Gevonna Fassett:

Have a good one.

Michael Holtz:

... great day.

Gevonna Fassett:

Thank you. You do likewise.

Intro/Outro Speaker:

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