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Researcher rewarded for devotion to aging issues

By Linda Ann Chomin
O&E STAFF WRITER

Peter Lichtenberg hugs his son, Thomas, again and again as they sit in front of the fireplace in their Farmington home. It's obvious this time between father and offspring is cherished.

Lichtenberg works up to 75 hours a week as director of the Institute of Gerontology at Wayne State University, but his dedication to researching elder issues hasn't gone unnoticed. The neuropsychologist recently received two awards from peers and the State of Michigan. A special tribute and citation was signed by Gov. Jennifer Granholm for 10 years of service to the Michigan Dementia Coalition that improves the quality of life for persons with dementia and their families. A second honor, the 2008 Anthony V. DeVito II Memorial Award, came from the University of Michigan Geriatrics Center for his outstanding service, dedication and commitment to excellence in geriatrics education in Michigan.

While Lichtenberg is humbled by the recognition, his wife, Susan MacNeill, is outspoken about her husband's accomplishments which include authoring five books on dementia and related gerontology topics. MacNeill understands the devotion it takes because she works in the same field of neuropsychology.

Lichtenberg came to Wayne State University 18 years ago as an assistant professor and was promoted to full professorship in the psychology department in 2002. He earned his Ph.D. in clinical psychology from Purdue University where he minored in gerontology. His particular area of research involves issues related to dementia and depression.

"I think the awards are wonderful and well-deserved," said MacNeill, a neuropsychologist who's teamed up with Lichtenberg as part of her work in Beaumont Hospital's Geriatrics Division. "I look to him as an expert. When I have questions in my practice, the first person I go to is him."

MORE ELDERLY

Lichtenberg's knowledge of gerontology is evidenced in more than 125 scientific writings published in journals. One of his goals is to educate primary care physicians to detect dementia and Alzheimer's. That's especially important because in the last six years the aging population in the area has grown 40 percent.

"There's a huge increase because of the aging population," said Lichtenberg. "The incidence goes up after age 80 and 85. It's possible to accurately diagnose Alzheimer's 95 percent of the time. The Alzheimer's Association just came out with new estimates that the disease affects 5.3 million Americans. There's always hope for treatment. That's why the best approach is early detection. There are abnormal brain changes visible before symptoms are noticeable. Once symptoms are noticeable it's pretty far down the line."

ACTIVE PARENTS

Lichtenberg says his work with older adults is a labor of love. He talks proudly of his parents — father

Philip, 82, and mother Elsa, 80.

“Both are amazing,” said Lichtenberg. “She hikes 10 miles a couple of times a week. Dad plays indoor badminton and swims. They’re engaged in volunteer activities and great models for aging well.”

Lichtenberg sits at his grandfather’s table where he works when not at his WSU office downtown. A family man, he loves to read and play basketball with his 7-year-old son. Lichtenberg treasures the annual summer getaway to Manistee where they swim every day. He’s devoted to Thomas, his daughters Sophie, 4, and Emily, 16, and his wife. The desk keeps him grounded to the task at hand — to enhance the lives of older individuals. The Institute’s Art of Aging Successfully Conference, which annually celebrates growing older by offering a daylong event for seniors age 55 and up, was on Thursday. The much-anticipated event featured sessions on everything from holistic therapies and Tai Chi to an exhibit of nearly 100 creative works that illustrate their talents.

“We want to dispel myths about aging,” said Lichtenberg. “Older people are so often identified as having nothing to offer. The conference celebrates creativity and wellness. We try not to make it a disease-related conference. What we need to do as an institute needs to be translated into public awareness. There’s too much focus on a cure for dementia. The public needs to know personhood remains strong. There are many vital roles they can play.”

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