Activity and participation are key words for Dr. Heather Fritz, the IOG’s newest faculty member and an occupational therapist by training and passion. “How do the mundane activities of daily life promote, or reduce, health and wellness?” she asks. “And how does a person’s environment affect those activities?”

Dr. Fritz’s current research put her deep into Detroit’s most dire neighborhoods to ask people who live there about stress. The interviews are part of a larger look at the relationship between daily activities, neighborhood stressors, and stress response in African Americans 55 and older, with an average age of 79. One hundred people participated, all taken from the Participant Resource Pool created through the IOG’s Healthier Black Elders Center.

Each participant gave a hair sample, completed measures of stress and coping, and took samples of their own saliva four times a day for the next two weeks.
Neighborhoods

seven days. The hair and saliva will be tested for cortisol, a hormone manufactured in response to stress.

Recruits were also given a smartphone for the week to input details of what they were doing at the time. “Does the who, what, when, where, why and how of daily activities protect you or exacerbate your stress?” Dr. Fritz said. This approach, connecting behavior with biologic samples, is quantitative, the systematic investigation of observable phenomena by statistical, mathematical or computational techniques.

Dr. Fritz wanted another dimension. “What was going on under the surface?” she wondered. “How did these people feel about the situations around them?” This required a qualitative component, sometimes overlooked in neighborhood stress and health research. Dr. Fritz wanted to know what Detroit’s older adults considered stressful and how they experienced daily life. They already had a smartphone as part of the study; why not take some photos?

Her team identified a stratified sample of 20 persons from the original 100 and asked them to take at least 20 photographs in their community while going about their usual activities. The photographs could be anything in their neighborhood (other than people) that they found important to daily activity or stress. The project defined stress as things that are irritating, frustrating, make you feel unsafe, or just bother you. After a little cell phone training, the 20 older adults started snapping.

Personal interviews followed, talking to each person about their photos, then hours of transcription and coding to analyze the text. What emerged was a model of neighborhood change that encompassed four dimensions: environmental, institutional, knowledge and social. The core characteristic connecting all these? Loss of trustworthiness.

Houses in ruins, neighbors gone, sidewalks broken, crime on the rise, and slow police response, all can trigger fear in older African Americans residents. Many restrict their activity, such as not going out at night, in response to these perceived risks. They no longer trust the neighborhoods they call home. (See Older Adults Carry Guns.)

The good news is that actions can be taken to restore trustworthiness across the four dimensions. The repair of street lights in dozens of Detroit neighborhoods has reduced crime. Demolishing abandoned houses has improved the aesthetic and removed potential crime spots. Older adults themselves are showing resilience by taking action to preserve and protect their neighborhoods, like organizing clean-up committees and block club meetings.

“The City of Detroit should pay attention to the voices of these older adults,” said Dr. Fritz. “Most of them own their homes and are incredibly invested in their neighborhoods.
Dr. Fritz’ interviews revealed that several older African American women have concealed carry permits for handguns or are considering getting one. The following excerpt illustrates an older woman’s fear, panic, frustration, and regret about needing a gun to feel safe.

“I was out there in the yard, and a couple, I had seen them walking around, a man and a woman, looked like they could have been in their 30s. And I was pulling weeds. And I just happened to look up and before I know it, they were right here, almost to me. And I panicked. . . . And so it looked like they were coming toward me. And I start coming in the house. And so she said [to participant], “Wait a minute, wait a minute, do you need some help?”

I said, “Do I look like I need help?” So, because then I got pissed you know. I got mad that I had to be scared. And so . . . maybe they weren’t going to do anything. But I didn’t know.

And so I wasn’t like that before. So I came in the house and put my gun on my hip and went back there and start working in the yard, and I thought, come on and [laughter] do I need some help? That’s just anger, but it’s frustration, because you see the stuff on the TV [media images about criminal threats]. They, you know, suppose they were decent and wanted to help you?”

Older Adults Carry Guns to Ease Fear

They understand what they need.” Follow-up research by Dr. Fritz and her team will examine these and related issues in a larger sample of older African Americans.

Within the next few months, results from the larger study correlating neighborhood experiences with cortisol levels will be released. The combined qualitative and quantitative information will draw a detailed picture of Detroit’s older African Americans navigating a complex urban environment filled with change.

“We did find another silver lining,” Dr. Fritz said. “There is a perception among researchers that older adults can’t participate in technologically sophisticated studies. That perception is wrong. Older adults could use all the technology we gave them, cell phones, photos, alarms. With the right training, we had incredible success with technology.”

This type of resilience will help Detroit’s older adults survive and thrive.
Once a year, WSU students gather from opposite ends of the lifespan to share their research and compete for prizes. These bright undergrads and graduate students train at the Institute of Gerontology and its sister center, the Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute for Child & Family Development. They spend their time scanning brains, analyzing large data sets, investigating sexting, and mapping memory. The Lifespan Competition, held in February in the Freer House, lets them face off in both poster and podium presentations, judged by faculty experts from multiple disciplines.

“My students get a lot out of this,” said Dr. Noa Ofen, whose lab was well represented in the Winners Circle with two top awards. “Learning how to talk about your research is an important skill for students and all researchers to develop.” Dr. Ofen is a tenure track professor in the Department of Psychology with joint appointments to the IOG and Mer-
New Ciena Health Chats

Want an easy way to learn more about your health and safety? Attend Ciena Healthcare’s new Health Chats this spring. They’re free, they’re interesting, and there is bound to be one near you. “Ciena is dedicated to empowering seniors through education and resources,” Outreach Director Donna McDonald said. “The IOG’s mission is very similar, so this partnership seamlessly enhances both our organizations while benefiting greater numbers of older adults.”

Ciena has partnered with the IOG for several years, providing the lunches for our popular Lunch & Learn Healthier Black Elders programs. As the need for health education among older adults continued to grow, Ciena wanted to do more. They formed a special educational partnership with the IOG to sponsor the four additional programs below. Ciena will also host its “How to Talk to Your Doctor” workshop at our Art of Aging conference on April 21.

“Innovations” in Aging Conference

Experts from around the country, new technologies and treatments, and humane interventions that honor the person in person-centered care – these are the hallmarks of the IOG’s annual Issues in Aging conference. We’ve educated about 6,000 professionals at this two-day conference over the decades that we’ve hosted it. We’ve also built an unassailable reputation for quality and relevance to all who care for older adults. This year will not disappoint.

Outreach Director Donna MacDonald has planned Issues in Aging for nearly a decade. “This year’s program has many highlights,” she said, “from Telehealth to ethics to caregiving. Professionals consistently evaluate our conference as one of the best they attend. It’s a must for everyone working with older adults.”

What else is new with Issues? We’ve moved. Issues in Aging will be held in Livonia this year at the VisTaTech Conference Center on Schoolcraft College’s campus. As in the past, the first day examines Alzheimer’s and dementia and the second day looks at frailty care. Experts will discuss the latest non-amyloid causes of dementia; emerging treatments and prevention in Alzheimer’s; the difficulty of the solitary older adult making medical decisions; telehealth; anxiety disorders; and protection from abuse. All presentations include time for questions.

Attend one day for $75 and 6 CEs or both days for $150 and 12 CEs. Students and non-professional seniors receive a $15 discount per day. Lunch is included and provides a comfortable time to connect with colleagues. Issues in Aging takes place on May 16-17. Registration ends May 10, so don’t delay. Register online through the www.iog.wayne.edu website calendar page.

The need for reliable, up-to-date information on aging continues to grow as we work hard to fill it. Receive e-announcements about our programs through a quick sign-up at http://www.iog.wayne.edu/forms/subscription.php or simply email Cheryl Deep at cheryldeep@wayne.edu with your first and last name, preferred email and type of programs desired.
UPCOMING EVENTS

Got Brains?

Just remember to bring yours and we will train it, strain it and entertain it. BrainStorm is a series of free educational workshops on brain health. Draw, puzzle, write backwards, laugh and learn in these light-hearted and well-researched sessions. Join the IOG’s Donna MacDonald and Cheryl Deep in one, two or all three sessions.

FREE
Dearborn Henry Ford Centennial Library
16301 Michigan Avenue, Dearborn, MI 48126
All at 6:00 – 7:30 pm

Wednesday, June 22 – BrainStorm: A Workout for the Mind
Wednesday, July 20 – BrainStorm: Memory Tricks
Wednesday, August 24 – BrainStorm: The Joys of Socializing

For more info call the Dearborn library at 313-943-2330

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rill Palmer Skillman. Her busy lab currently supports one postdoctoral fellow, four graduate students and more than 12 undergraduates.

Ofen Lab winners were Lingfei Tang for Best Graduate Student Podium Presentation; and Priya Sam for Best Undergraduate Poster. Lingfei’s research is on the contribution of the prefrontal cortex to the formation of memory. He is a third-year student in the Cognitive Development and Social Psychology program at WSU. Priya’s project looked at how memory strategies impact the brain’s ability to recall words. She is a junior majoring in psychology and planning a medical career in pediatrics.

The third IOG winner was Christina Wong for Best Graduate Student Poster, Equivalence of the Semantic Clusters in the HVLT-R Alternate Forms. HVLT-R is a 12-item learning task used to assess higher order organizational strategies and to help in a diagnosis of dementia. Christina is a student in the Psychology Department and currently holds the prestigious Rumble Fellowship.

Winners (from top): Lingfei Tang and IOG Board Chair Carol Edwards. Priya Sam (right) with Faculty Mentor Dr. Noa Ofen.