

Cat with the hat



Professor, seniors
teach young medical
students about aging

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Medical students laugh and clap as Dr. Peter Boling, costumed as Dr. Seuss' the Cat in the Hat, saunters onstage and curls down on a chair to read them a story.

Their Virginia Commonwealth University geriatrics professor opens "You're Only Old Once: A Book for Obsolete Children" and begins: "Is this a children's book? Well . . . not immediately. You buy a copy for your child now and you give it to him on his 70th birthday."

The 350 first- and second-year med students listen to Seuss' recitation of fanciful medical tests that start with the Eyesight and Solveny Test and continue along Stethoscope Row until patients end up "properly pilled" and "properly billed" at the Golden Years Clinic.

They laugh at the all-too-real parts. Boling grins behind his white-paint cat face. His black stage-makeup "whiskers" twitch.

But their laughter notches higher when three retirees take their seats to talk about "Truth and Fiction in Longevity."

That topic had been covered in the morning with medical, scientific and practitioner thoroughness by Dr. Patricia A. Bloom, a Mount Sinai School of Medicine researcher, internist and educator who has been cited by New York Magazine as one of the best geriatricians in New York.

One of her slides for the students reads, "Genetic Determinants of Longevity: Genes which ensure fidelity of an organism's physiology may lose function after the reproductive phase, or weaken and be insufficient to prevent stochastic damage." Rough translation: After you pass childbearing age, nature fades you out.

She also covered even more scientific issues about the aging process and some very practical advice you will likely hear from these doctors after they graduate. That includes how much you should exercise (which is more than most actually do on a regular basis) and what you should eat and how much (which is less than most put in their mouths).

Bloom is thin and fit. There's a debate raging among researchers on the benefits of severe caloric restriction, which improves the aging process for rodents, fish, spiders and water fleas but isn't yet nailed down about primates.

But there's no debate about the benefits of exercise, which she and other re-



EVA RUSSO/TIMES-DISPATCH

Meagan Cogbill (from left), Sally Stander and Kathleen Lucas, all first-year medical students, react to comments during a recent forum on aging.

Aging

— FROM PAGE E1

youth."

Bloom, who listens intently, sits in the audience later at the Medical Sciences Building auditorium. She takes notes as the three seniors talk about passion (both in sex and life purpose), laughter, positive attitude, emotional resilience, healthy diet, daily exercise, social life, loss, close family and friendship ties and retirement interests they really care about.

The students laugh, listen and ask questions, many of which sound like things they've always wanted to know but were afraid to ask.

None of them fazes Francis Church, 77, a cellist, freelance writer and music reviewer and former Richmond News Leader music critic and special sections editor; Mary Shaughnessy, 87, a widow, lifelong exerciser and hiker; and Frances Wessells, 85, a dancer who teaches interpretive dance at VCU and former long-time Times-Dispatch dance critic. Tom Price, a 1952 Olympics Gold medalist, and his wife, June, were unable to attend as scheduled.

"I'm afraid of death right now, terrified," a future physician confesses. At what age do you begin to let go of your fear of mortality?

"I think that comes with age," Wessells answers. She notes that

after widowhood, she married a man 20 years her junior and that she wants to stick around "because I'm very happy." But "if I died tomorrow, we have had a wonderful life. I don't fear death.

"This is something I've wanted to say for a long time," she adds. "There comes a time when you're ready to go. I know it's your job to keep us all alive. I feel it's important to keep us as comfortable as possible as long as we live. But, believe me, there comes a time when you've done it, you've been there and you're ready to go. I think doctors can be aware of this and allow it to happen."

How do you reconcile physical and mental acuity limitations?

With humor, tenacity and functional reserve from a lifetime of good habits. All three panelists are lifelong exercisers, and the younger such habits are instilled, the better, they advise.

Shaughnessy says she had a stroke "that kind of set me back but I've recovered." She and her late husband were hikers and daily walkers in New York City.

"I walked more living in the city than I ever did where I live now, which is in the country. In the city, we walked to the bus, and then we walked away from the bus. By the time you walked that much, you might as well walk where you wanted to go." The students, who walk the hilly campus, laugh.

Her current project is visiting all the national parks with her daughter and hiking them as much as she's able to.

How have you dealt with major losses compared with friends who handle loss poorly?

Shaughnessy reports she was happily married for 57 years before her husband, who had a stroke, died: "I can't say I mourned. I didn't weep. He had had a good life. He was tired. He was ready to go."

Church adds, "We all face death at one time or another in our families. I'd be lying if I said I haven't thought about death, worried about it," ever since childhood when he recited the "If I die before I wake" prayer. When his father died, Church played a requiem at the funeral. "I find solace in music. Life must go on, even after a loved one has gone on."

Do you like for people to get up and give you their seats?

This one is for Wessells, who says, "I really don't think of myself as an old lady." She describes being offered a seat on the bus just as she was thinking about giving someone else her seat. "Now I know I'm an old lady," she thought.

She accepts the offer: "It felt good to sit down." The students laugh again.

How do you feel about the way the world has changed in your lifetimes?

"Great!" Shaughnessy says. "I thoroughly enjoy it." She says she's very grateful for all the inventions and improvements.

Are old people the cause of world discord and wars?, a young man asks.

"It's not a question of age, but of ideology or personality or philosophy or point of view," Church says. "Most policy-makers aren't old but middle-aged."

How do you all feel about the advent of Viagra? This is asked by a young man. After much laughter, silence ensues. They wait for answers.

Boling, who is walking behind the panelists, leans over and dangles the microphone limply above the panelists. The students boot and holler.

"I think it's absolutely wonderful," Wessells opines. "If somebody needs it and it helps them. But Medicare shouldn't pay for it."

"I agree with her about Medicare," Church says. Medicare, he says, shouldn't pay for the sexual arousal drug because of its varying efficacy, a subject often discussed among men. Then he delivers a common reaction in a one-liner: "It don't work."

The docs-to-be laugh so hard some slide down in their chairs.

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