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U of L students solve real-world problems through work-integrated learning

Seniors in Lethbridge isolated due to the COVID-19 pandemic will soon have the chance to make their own history, thanks to an innovative project by University of Lethbridge students.

The Pieces of the Past project, which pairs Volunteer Lethbridge volunteers with isolated seniors, will allow seniors to reflect on positive memories through a series of questions. Volunteers will ask seniors to share a favourite childhood memory, a memorable vacation, what they hope for their grandchildren and what they are most looking forward to after the pandemic, for example. Their responses will be printed into a booklet by Volunteer Lethbridge as a keepsake for the senior and their family. Pieces of the Past is currently in the pilot stage.

The project grew out of a hackathon created by the U of L's Agility program for students in Dr. Chris Churchill's Liberal Education class called Early Career Success. In this experiential learning model, teams of students were matched with community organizations to help them tackle an issue they were facing because of the pandemic. One group worked with a small business to help them reach younger customers during the pandemic while another worked to increase the profile of Lethbridge as a destination for employees. At the end of the semester, students presented their ideas to a panel of judges.

"A class like this really helps students realize how their liberal education applies to the real world," says Churchill. "All the teams did terrifically and the panel chose Pieces of the Past as the winner."

The challenge the winning team of Allyssa Acojedo, Camila Dias, Krystal Goltz and Dshamilja Egli faced was to create a way to help seniors who were struggling because of the pandemic.

"The project we put in front of the students was how we might support and empower seniors who were isolated," says Connie-Marie Riedlhuber, seniors program coordinator with Volunteer Lethbridge. "What we needed was a low-cost, communication solution to reach isolated seniors."

Last April, Volunteer Lethbridge started the Keep in Touch program with funding from the United Way. Riedlhuber knew many seniors would be isolated, especially those living alone,

given the restrictions brought about by the pandemic. The program pairs volunteers with seniors for weekly phone support calls. Pieces of the Past adds another component to this program.

Although the hackathon ended last semester, Acojedo, a fourth-year psychology student, had the opportunity to implement the program through an applied study and an undergraduate Agility Fellowship. The Agility Fellowship program is a donor-funded program started by Bruce McKillop to enable students to complete a paid internship of 120 to 200 hours where they take a leadership role in a project of their choice. This semester, she's developed protocols for the program and recently launched a pilot with a few volunteers to test it out.

"I learned so much during the hackathon and in my applied study and I'm thankful for everyone who helped our team with this project," says Acojedo. "I learned tips and tricks on how to be disciplined and organized, but the biggest thing is leadership. I'm the one leading this project and that's definitely an experience I've never had before. I've grown to be a better person and a better professional from these experiences."

"I value the partnership we had with the University students and what they were able to bring to us as an organization," says Riedlhuber. "It was a gift to be able to work with them and help them have that integrated experience and — for us — to build something that we didn't have the capacity to build on our own."

March is Work Integrated Learning month and today, the National Day of Work Integrated Learning, offers an opportunity to celebrate the work U of L students do in the community while they are completing their education.

U of L students have been participating in co-operative education and work-integrated learning for the past 30 years and hundreds of students take part each academic year. Not only are they learning valuable skills for their future careers, they're making a big difference by helping the Lethbridge community.

This news release can be found online at [Pieces of the Past](#).

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