

Active Minds Bloom In Henderson's Fertile Field Of Learning

by Susan Dugan

In 2002, when John Stalker Henderson began teaching poetry classes in the basement of Washington Park United Church of Christ to stay intellectually involved as a stay-at-home parent, the former high school teacher was surprised by the advanced age of his students.



WITH A STAFF OF RETIRED TEACHERS, GRADUATE STUDENTS, DU PROFESSORS and local experts, John Henderson's Active Minds program brings classes on current events and a myriad of other interesting topics into dozens of metro area senior care facilities.

"I was used to teaching poetry to seniors of the 17 and 18 variety," he says.

"These people were in their 60s, 70s, 80s, and even 90s. But they were remarkably similar to the kids I taught in the sense of being intimidated by poetry, but also joyful once it opened up to them. That led me to think there might be a real need for this in this age group, and to develop the poetry exploration program to bring into retirement homes."

Spurred by an inner creative nudge received during a regular morning run in Washington Park, Henderson queried 12 such communities within a close radius of the home he shared in Cory/Merrill with his wife and two daughters, and received interested calls back from nine. "I now know, wow, that's a great response," but at the time I was no businessman, and just wanted to earn a little money to supplement what my wife was earning and stay professionally engaged. I started teaching five poetry classes and what grew out of it was a love of teaching this audience, that had an immense, immense

thirst for knowledge.ö

Although still a part-time gig, the program began to grow and expand to accommodate market demand. Henderson pitched the poetry program to Park Place retirement community administration, for example. They expressed an interest in current event programming rather than poetry. öIt happened to be in the weeks leading up to the second Gulf War in 2003 and so, like any fledgling businessperson, you say -Yes,øthen figure it out afterwards,ö he says.

He had committed to show up on a Tuesday that happened to coincide with the front edge of the infamous three-foot snowstorm that year. Henderson bundled up, strapped on his snowshoes, and headed out into the blizzard. öThe snow was coming down like crazy and I trudged three-and-a-half miles. These people had pretty much written off my showing up and I walked into the room covered in snow and they burst into applause. I had had the presence of mind to pack a backpack with my notes about Iraq and ó knowing my audience ó a nice outfit and shoes. I came back into the room to gasps and more applause.ö

When additional requests for more varied programming began to exceed Henderson's ability to meet demand, a chance meeting provided the answer to growing the business. öMy wife was friends with a woman whose husband, Zane Robertson, was an MBA from Stanford.ö The two dads met at a preschool back-to-school night and Robertson -- amazed by the response to Henderson's limited marketing efforts ó soon joined as a partner in the new venture: Active Minds, providing a wide range of educational programming to senior citizens, bookstores, libraries and corporations.

The partnership allowed Henderson to focus primarily on teaching, hiring and training instructors while Robertson, also a former teacher, primarily addressed the company's business and marketing demands. öThe partnership was utterly essential because before that it was just *The John Henderson Show* and afterwards it turned into a real, growing business.ö

Active Mind's core business remains providing physically accessible education primarily to residents of more than 40 retirement communities throughout the Denver metro area. öEven though places such as Heritage Club are less than two miles from DU, they might as well be Timbuktu for some of these people,ö Henderson says. öWe bring the programming to them and aspire to really broaden the paradigm from more entertainment-style programming to educational programming. It doesn't replace bridge or someone playing Tommy Dorsey, but it's about intellectual engagement and people coming together to understand the subject, whether it's the U.S. relationship with Pakistan or T.S. Eliot.ö

The ancillary benefits include community building in a population that may feel isolated for reasons beyond their control. öActive Minds is so much about the phenomena that people who live in these communities are often thrown together through tragic circumstances and certainly upheaval, whether it's being widowed or just the natural progression of -I can't stay in my home any more.ø We feel very strongly that Active Minds is a part of community building. People come together and engage with one another as neighbors and friendships grow.ö

And educational engagement plus community building equals healthy aging. öNeither Zane nor I are neurobiologists but we follow the studies and know that what we're providing is best practice for what is good for the brain. And for us, it's flat out good business. When we first started, the first of the baby boomers had not yet retired. Now every single day tens of thousands are waking up and turning 65.ö

Active Minds reaches out to the whole continuum of elder care, including Alzheimer's units, tailoring its approach to meet specific audience needs. öSome of the most rewarding teaching experiences I've

ever had have been teaching folks with Alzheimer's. Seeing these people reached and not being talked down to or infantilized. Delivering educational programs in a way that honors individuals, that's the core of what we've always desired to do. And we get it back in spades and it fuels us and fuels all our instructors.

Henderson has a personal interest in reaching this population. Since his dad passed away, his mother has been confined to a nursing facility outside Washington, D.C., where he grew up. "My mother, a Phi Beta Kappa from Vassar, has a very rare neurological disease and part of my involvement with the Alzheimer's Association is about honoring the people in front of me as a way of honoring my mother, whose life has been severely affected by this malady."

Regardless of target audience, the organization seeks to offer a balance of topics, alternating a range of international with domestic issues; intense subjects with lighter fare such as a recent program on ghost stories of Colorado. While entertaining, the subject still offers instructors a way to weave in solid curriculum about the history of Colorado, for example, interesting fare for an overwhelmingly out-of-state audience. "I'll ask at the beginning of programs how many people were born here and at best get 25 percent raised hands. I've had programs where no one raised their hands."

Varied part-time instructors – retired teachers, graduate students, DU professors, local experts, etc. – enjoy perfecting their teaching skills and developing personal relationships without the burden of exams, papers and administrative tasks. And they are always learning from their students. "I tell them you never know who's in the room," Henderson says. "One of the challenges our instructors must overcome is realizing we're not there as the singular authority on the topic. We're there with a level of authority, with well-researched, highly objective information on the topic at hand, but we coach our instructors to honor the wisdom in the room. I'll do a talk on North Korea's nuclear program, for example, and in the audience is somebody who was at Los Alamos in World War II. So that person supplements the presentation from the scientific side."

Active Minds continues to grow and to broaden its reach to other states as well as to cultural institutions such as Tattered Cover. "Tattered Cover recognizes that what we provide fits their model. We were recently partnered with the *Denver Silent Film Festival* this past September as a way for them to grow the awareness of the festival. That's the sort of aspirations we have: to be a part of the cultural landscape of Colorado. We're on the path toward that."