

Aging with Gusto!

Ila Parker

Elizabeth (Dee) Furlough

Introduction

Growing older raises many questions about the future. How do people imagine their retirement years? Do they see themselves strolling along the beach with loved ones, gardening, traveling, playing with the grandkids, swinging a golf club? Or, do they fear their dreams will be lost because of poor health, financial restraints, or lack of confidence?

North Carolina Extension aging programs are designed to help people age with gusto by teaching them how to achieve optimum financial, physical, and mental well-being in their later years. Adults learn how to prepare for and cope with problems related to finances, legal issues, health, caregiving, housing, and self-care. The programs emphasize that choices made today affect the quality of life as people grow older. The secrets of positive aging are revealed to help protect the dreams of a healthy retirement.

Four years ago when Aging with Gusto was adopted as a Cooperative Extension Major Program in North Carolina, a number of state specialists developed a multi-disciplinary curriculum to help Family and Consumer Educators organize and facilitate Aging with Gusto programs. FC Educators met the challenge by organizing multi-county all-day extravaganzas that left record-breaking crowds wanting more. This article showcases the multi-county efforts of FC Educators in the Northeast District. [\(1\)](#) With three successful all-day events to their credit, they are currently planning their fourth annual Aging with Gusto Extravaganza.

The Planning Stage

The Northeast District contains mostly rural counties with small populations. Combining efforts ensures cost-effective use of resources and good program turnout. For each event, the FC Educators form an area-wide committee and divide the various tasks of hosting such a major event among themselves based upon their skills and resources. They form subcommittees to

handle resource development, decorations, evaluations, concurrent session speakers, exhibitors, guest speakers, marketing, and registration.

Because the focus is on the positive aspects of aging, the group adopts themes that will be fun for the participants, as well as cost effective on a limited budget. The first year's theme was a carnival, with decorations of helium balloons and carnival replicas. The second year's theme was a cruise, with the "passengers" receiving leis as they entered the building. The third year's theme was a safari, with decorations of exotic grasses and African inspired totems.

The Facility

The facility is crucial to the success of the program because it must accommodate large crowds. The group books a centrally located multi-purpose Extension facility that accommodates the exhibits and has several large expandable rooms. Smaller rooms for break-out concurrent sessions are also helpful.

Marketing

To market the program, the group develops a press release, flyer, and brochure that can be personalized for each county. The articles are used in newspapers, as well as FC Educators' newsletters. The flyers and brochures are distributed at Senior Centers, hospital waiting rooms, doctors' offices, libraries, churches, Extension Homemakers' meetings, Senior Nutrition Site programs, etc. The group also promotes the events on a local television station.

Funding

The events are self-supporting from sponsorship, contributions, exhibitor fees, and registrations. Each event has generated approximately \$2,500. The registration fee covers only lunch and snacks to keep the fee as low as possible. The bulk of the funding is received from local hospitals, home health agencies, regional medical facilities, retirement communities, telecommunication companies, banks, and health/fitness programs. Sponsors contribute \$200 or more, and contributors give \$26 - \$199.

Exhibitors

The exhibitor fee is \$25 per table. Exhibitors are selected based upon the general needs and interests of the audience. Invited exhibitors represent a cross-section of topics: attitudes, family, housing, health, nutrition, fitness, clothing, safety, security, estate planning, money, communications, leisure, travel, and hobbies. Some exhibits include products and services

related to aging. Limited health screenings are available at each event, such as blood pressure readings, and hearing and vision tests.

The Program

To help the participants feel comfortable in their surroundings and with other participants, each event begins with a **warm-up**. The first year, an exercise therapist got the crowd moving with his enthusiasm and music. He was invited back the second year to teach the group the Macarena. The third year, another exercise therapist taught participants how to exercise for varying levels of fitness, including exercises for those in wheelchairs. The warm-up exercise has proven to be a bonding experience for the participants, as well as for the host FC Educators.

The warm-up exercise is followed by a **motivational or humorous speaker** who is familiar with the Aging with Gusto program, and who bases his or her presentation on the lighter side of growing older. The speakers have been funny and encouraging and have used props to convey their message. Evaluations and feedback show that this segment is important because it focuses the participants on the positive aspects of aging and piques their interest for the following educational sessions.

Lunch is an integral part of the program because meal selection is based upon the special nutritional and dietary needs of the audience. **Luncheon entertainment** merges fun with learning. In 1996, a local clothing store lent clothes for a "Dressing Nifty After Fifty" fashion show. In 1997, a former Mrs. Senior North Carolina presented, in song and visually, the many hats people wear through out life. In 1998, two dancers from the community civic ballet presented several interpretative dances around a theme of "remember when."

The **breakout sessions** are the heart of the program. Two breakout sessions, each an hour long, have three concurrent presentations from which participants can choose. Choices have included investments, insurance, wills, funeral planning, foot care, exercise, nutrition, food preparation, consumer fraud, food and drug interaction, fashion alterations, disease prevention, dispersing family heirlooms/possessions, indoor air quality, and computers and the Internet. One of the sessions was "Living Creatively" which was an interactive activity designed to motivate participants into seeking and accomplishing their secret aspirations.

The Extravaganza ends with **door prizes** that are donated by the exhibitors. Each event has varied how the door prizes are awarded. The first year, numbered program packets were used. The second year, the participants played bingo for the door prizes. The third year, name tags were drawn for the prizes.

Evaluations

Participants are asked to evaluate the program after each event. Most evaluations contain accolades for the program, but suggestions for improvement are incorporated into the following year's program. Written evaluations show that the programs are appreciated, anticipated, and enjoyed. Selected statements from participants are in [Table One](#).

Attendance

More than 600 participants have aged with gusto at the three events. Approximately 85 percent are female. Many are first-time users of Extension services.

Conclusion

Aging with Gusto programs are successful because they appeal to the age-old need to find the ever-elusive fountain of youth. Rather than promising a magic elixir, however, these programs focus on self-help techniques that stress hard work and effort to achieve optimum financial, physical, and mental well-being in the later years. The potential benefits go far beyond the benefits to the individual. People who age with gusto will be less of a concern for family and have less need for health care and government services. More importantly, people who age with gusto will maintain their independence, dignity, and self respect for as long as possible.

Family and Consumer Education Agents who contributed to the programming efforts discussed in this article are:

Bertie County, [Linda Boyette](#)

Chowan County, [Shari Farless](#) and Bonita Williams

Dare County, [Rosie Patton](#)

Hyde County, [Jean Ballance](#)

Martin County, [Ila Parker](#)

Pitt County, [Alexis Scott](#) and Celia Beauchamp

[Tyrrell County](#), Dee Furlough

[Washington County](#), Page Bolz

Visit the eight-county ["Aging with Gusto! Extravaganzas"](#) through pictures.

Table 1, Participant Feedback

"The event was positive all around. It was the best program Extension has had. I believe health and personal appearance are very important (as we age), and both issues were addressed. It was a great program."

"The conference was very good. Through the speakers and exhibitors, I realized I was on the right track for planning for my future."

"The day was enjoyable, and the information was good. It made me look closer at such issues as making a will and financial matters. I know I need to make a will -- that was really stressed. I will also apply the financial information I received to my business."

"It is important for us (older population) to have up-to-date information so we can make wise decisions. It is also important that we realize there is still a lot out there for us. This program reminded me of that."

An exhibitor expressed: "I discovered I had overlooked the senior audience when I was advertising for customers. I increased my business by 25 people as a direct result of the program."

"The program keeps your spirits moving."

"Have attended all three, enjoyed . . . Exercise is always good!"

"This is my second time to attend, and I've learned a lot of things at both meetings. My health style is much better by attending . . ."

"You don't have to stop growing intellectually as you age"

Table 2 The following information has been reported by North Carolina Family and Consumer Educators from January 1996 through June 1998.

Objective	Measures of Progress	Statewide Impacts
<p>One: Participants in aging-issues programs will increase awareness, gain knowledge, change attitudes, develop skills, and adopt practices and behaviors to help make their later years more financially secure.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18,141 people increased awareness and knowledge of financial management techniques and consumer issues. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7,067 people improved their financial status through adoption of consumer and financial

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6,758 people adopted financial management and consumer practices. • 5,657 people increased awareness and knowledge of estate planning. • 2,367 people adopted estate planning practices. • 4,184 people increased awareness and knowledge of retirement planning and savings. • 1,951 people adopted retirement and savings practices. 	<p>management practices.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People reported that they increased their savings and/or retirement contributions for future financial stability by \$777,760. • 1,829 people developed and implemented an estate plan. • 1,625 people developed and implemented a plan for possible future incompetency and dependency.
<p>Two: Participants in aging-issues programs will increase awareness, gain knowledge, change attitudes, develop skills, and adopt practices and behaviors to help them improve their health status.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5,673 people adopted practices such as decreased fat intake, decreased sodium intake, or increased fruit and vegetable intake. • 12,889 people increased awareness and knowledge of healthy behaviors such as lowering the fat or increasing the fiber in their diets. • 4,849 people adopted behaviors to meet the Food Guide Pyramid guidelines. • 4,121 people adopted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People reported avoiding \$633,824 of costs through reduced risk of chronic disease. • People reported avoiding \$145,657 of costs through improved health status via fewer visits to physicians. • 43,285 people reported improving their health status through adoption of health practices.

	<p>practices which lead to healthy physiological changes, such as decreases in blood cholesterol, blood pressure, blood sugar, and/or excess weight.</p>	
<p>Three: Caregivers will increase awareness, gain knowledge, change attitudes, develop skills, and adopt practices and behaviors to help them provide better caregiving.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1,242 people adopted stress management and other self-care practices, including use of formal and respite services. • 3,122 people increased awareness and knowledge of community resources. • 2,288 people increased awareness and knowledge of caregiving skills. • 710 people adopted caregiving practices that improve the care of the impaired elder or other care receiver. • 2,204 people increased awareness and knowledge about the need for coordinating legal, financial, and health care decision making. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1,187 caregivers reported improved quality of life and decreased stress. • 929 people reported improved care for impaired elders and other care receivers. • 1,154 people increased utilization of community resources by participants caring for older adults. • 1,855 instances of improved interagency cooperation on aging and health promotion issues were reported.
<p>Four: Participants in aging-issues programs will increase awareness, gain knowledge, change attitudes, develop skills, and adopt practices and behaviors to help promote affordable and accessible housing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4,576 people increased awareness and knowledge of housing options, financial options, and accessibility options 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 360 people reported living in more affordable housing. • 584 people reported improving or increasing their

<p>for older adults.</p>	<p>that lead to affordable or accessible housing.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 971 people adopted housing technologies that make housing accessible, such as design features, furnishings, and products. • 410 collaborations and linkages with housing related agencies and individuals that foster affordable and accessible housing. 	<p>accessibility to housing.</p>
<p>Five: Older adults on fixed incomes will increase awareness, gain knowledge, change attitudes, develop skills, and adopt practices and behaviors to help them improve the quality of their physical health and enhance their self-care.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6,095 people increased awareness and knowledge of practices that promote health, such as use of medicines. • 4,986 people adopted practices that lead to improved health status. • 1,612 people increased awareness and knowledge of practices that promote food safety. • 1,145 people adopted practices that promote proper food storage and safety. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People reported avoiding \$6,886 of costs through adoption of practices that lead to safe use of medicines. • People reported avoiding \$68,600 of costs through adoption of practices that lead to proper food storage and safety

Number of Volunteers: 2,883

Hours Volunteered: 19,326

Endnote

(1) The success of the Northeast District is not unique in this program area. Other multi-county efforts and single county efforts have been as successful. The consistent success of the Aging with Gusto programs in North Carolina shows a growing need to help older adults prepare for and cope with the problems of growing older. Statewide accomplishment reports for North Carolina's aging-issues programs are listed in Table Two. [Return to text.](#)

Author

Ila Parker is a Family and Consumer Educator in Martin County, North Carolina. Elizabeth (Dee) Furlough is a Family and Consumer Educator in Tyrrell County, North Carolina. They are field faculty for North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service, North Carolina State University.

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