The mission of the MSU Outreach and Engagement Council is to strategically champion engagement at MSU through outreach, leadership, and service to fulfill the land-grant mission. The Council highlights university-community partnerships that embody the spirit of engagement: a mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity. This two-way interaction is a core value of our land-grant institution, and we honor our employees, students and partners who embrace this ideal. Learn more at montana.edu/outreachengagementcouncil

Empowered Engagement for First Year Writing Students

What happens when an MSU writing student is partnered with an elderly Bozeman citizen for eight weeks in an interview project? All sorts of astonishing things! Jill Davis, an adjunct instructor in the Department of English, introduced the “Tuesdays with Morrie Project” interview project to her WRIT 101 students. The students had just completed reading Mitch Albom’s book Tuesdays with Morrie about Albom’s time spent with 78-year-old Morrie Schwartz, a retired Brandeis University sociology professor who was dying from Lou Gehrig’s disease (ALS).

Students were partnered with an elderly Bozeman citizen for eight weeks. Students used the writing skills they learned in class to make a difference in someone’s life: they spent time listening to another’s story and gifting the partner’s family with an essay. What began four years ago as an oral history interview endeavor has progressed into meaningful intergenerational conversations packed with lively discussion.

“These interview projects provide a ‘win-win’ experience for both partners,” said Davis. “Students raise the bar on their writing by writing for a ‘real world’ audience while participating in meaningful civic engagement experiences.” Davis added that students not only evaluate their writing practices and improvement but reflect on their growth as stewards and participants of a larger discursive community.

“These interview projects ultimately help students gain the ability to suspend judgment, demonstrate compassion, and enter into an empathic relationship with ‘other,’” she added. Because reminiscence is common at the end of life, the participating seniors find it helpful to reflect on their lives with an attentive, thoughtful listener, said Davis. Students find it beneficial to slow down and share the fabric of their busy lives with an elder who cares and offers sage counsel. The descriptive narratives produced by students are seen as valuable documents for the interviewee’s family. Davis said that recently, a segment of a student essay was read at his senior partner’s memorial service. “It is heartwarming to witness the bonds that form from these partnerships and the challenges both face concerning preconceived biases,” she said.

Davis said qualitative analysis confirms the project’s intergenerational focus shifts biases and misleading perceptions held by both sets of participants, thus effectively transforming both partners in the true sense of engagement.

Davis presented the Tuesdays with Morrie project at the Engagement Scholarship Consortium annual meeting in Lubbock, Texas, in October. She has also written about the project for Montana Professor and other publications.

MSU students Morgan Egbert, left, and Brian Spencer, second from right, teamed up with Bozeman seniors Bernice De Haas and A.J. Hancock for the writing project “Tuesdays with Morrie.”