

# STUDYING RURAL AGING AT TRENT UNIVERSITY

*Trent Centre for Aging & Society's new director brings her love for rural, community-based aging research to the classroom and beyond*

Community connections are what bring Dr. Elizabeth McCrillis's research and teaching to life. Early in her academic career as a psychology student at Memorial University of Newfoundland, Dr. McCrillis felt pulled beyond the walls of classrooms and labs to work closely with local individuals and organizations to explore health challenges facing rural communities. As a graduate research assistant, she found herself driving along rural roads in Newfoundland and Labrador, interviewing caregivers and older adults about their experiences with the long-term care system.

"As a young person, travelling to remote communities and interacting with older people inspired a complete switch to studying aging at the Ph.D. level. I had a goal of connecting with older people who were often marginalized from mainstream research, given the logistical and geographic challenges inherent to applied rural research."

During a brief hiatus from her Ph.D., Dr. McCrillis worked with the provincial government in Newfoundland and Labrador's Department of Municipal Affairs. As a program and policy development specialist, she met regularly with agencies and departments that supported and worked with older adults, and ultimately was approached to evaluate the Age-Friendly Newfoundland and Labrador Grants Program for her dissertation. Using a community-based research approach, joining together academic and community expertise in order to comprehensively understand local challenges, her doctoral work involved travelling to numerous



communities across the island of Newfoundland, connecting with community stakeholders working to make their communities more inclusive of and supportive to their aging populations. Ultimately, her research uncovered a new way of understanding the implementation of age-friendly community change in rural communities.

"I'm always so excited to get involved with local organizations and to meet with community members. These types of projects often involve a lot of groundwork and can be challenging to run, but the benefits are significant—it means my research can make a positive impact."

Thoroughly at home in Newfoundland and Labrador, it was a position at Trent University's Psychology Department that brought her to Peterborough, and back to her home province of Ontario, in 2016.

"Newfoundland and Labrador is an amazing place. It's beautiful, rugged, rural, and remote. It's an adventure to live and be there and I never thought I would leave."

At Trent, Dr. McCrillis teaches courses in the psychology of aging, qualitative research methods, the history of psychology, and health psychology, always highlighting community-based research as part of her effort to apply class content outside of the university setting. "It's important to have a solid foundation in theory, but I also want my students to see how psychology can and does have an impact in the real world." She also notes how community-based research and learning from others can provide essential context, regardless of the topic. "You have to get outside of the walls of an institution to try and understand, for example, where do women fit in to the history of psychology? What about other marginalized people? Why don't we talk about them? I dig for those factors and share them in my courses, encouraging students to take that questioning with them wherever they go."

Of special significance to Dr. McCrillis is a third year Psychology of Aging course. She was struck by the number of times she heard students remark that their own ageism or fears of aging declined after taking the course. With ageism being so prevalent in our society—it has been referred to as "the most tolerated form of social discrimination in Canada" by a Revera Inc. study—it wasn't uncommon for students to enter the course with negative beliefs or fears about what it means to grow older. Inspired to further explore this potentially positive impact of the



course on students, Dr. McCrillis launched a longitudinal study, along with colleague Dr. Éric Thériault at Cape Breton University, titled *Beyond Pedagogy: The Impacts of a Psychology of Aging Course on Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of Older Adults and Old Age*, together collecting two years' worth of qualitative and quantitative data from students taking their psychology of aging courses. The similarities between Cape Breton University and Trent University—both smaller, undergraduate-focused universities located in smaller cities surrounded by large rural areas characterized by rapidly aging populations—helped strengthen the data. During focus groups and interviews, the research team consistently heard students say things like “I don’t fear aging anymore,” or “I understand the perspectives of older people now,” or even “I’m actually looking forward to getting older.”

“Many students frankly reflected upon their own ageism before taking the course, or observed that they feared speaking out against ageism without an understanding of the science that debunks those myths. They often reported no longer holding ageist beliefs, or that they are ready to identify and stand up against ageist practices and comments—with some even considering careers working with older adults,” remarked Dr. McCrillis.

The findings will be published later this year, but the project doesn’t have to end there. Dr. McCrillis hopes to expand this to a national study, testing the research findings at other Canadian universities. She notes that courses like Psychology of Aging aren’t offered at many universities, but because of our growing aging population, it is a socially relevant topic worthy of incorporation within relevant undergraduate curriculums. On the topic of aging studies courses and research offerings, Trent University is a leader.

The *Beyond Pedagogy* study is one of Dr. McCrillis’s three research streams. She also works closely with Dr. Mark Skinner, Canada research chair in Rural Aging, Health and Social Care and founding director of the Trent Centre for Aging & Society (TCAS), and research coordinator Amber Colibaba on their Building Age-Friendly Communities Collaboration—a variety of projects that examine rural age-friendly initiatives and the factors that help, or hinder, their sustainability, along with other aging studies topics specific to the rural experience.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the team has just embarked on a new project, exploring the experiences of older volunteers and volunteer-based programs in Selwyn Township during the pandemic. Studying the impacts of physical distancing

on older volunteers, the team is drawing from case examples of voluntary organizations working within the fields of seniors’ housing, rural volunteer firefighting, and a volunteer-led library. Within this, they are examining the uniquely rural challenges of older volunteers supporting older people living in rural communities, in an era of global pandemic. The team is recruiting local volunteers from Selwyn Township to participate in their community-based research.

It was actually Dr. Skinner who invited Dr. McCrillis to join TCAS as a member when she first arrived at Trent in 2016. Within two years, Dr. McCrillis became an executive member, playing a pivotal role in fostering connections between students, faculty, visiting scholars, and the public. She is honoured to lead the Centre into the next three years as director.

“The Trent Centre for Aging & Society is a special place comprised of wonderful people, working toward important goals and action related to growing older in our communities,” says Dr. McCrillis. “Going forward, I aim to carry forward this vision of collaborative, community-based work in aging studies here in the Peterborough area and beyond.”