



Retelling our Story of Aging: Reimagining the Future through Community, Research, and Action

March 5, 2026

8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m.

**Friday Conference Center,
Chapel Hill, N.C.**

 **UNC-Chapel Hill**
(Event also livestreamed)

Register online

<http://go.unc.edu/lss-2026>

Join the UNC School of Social Work for our fifth annual Legacy Speakers Series. This year's event, "Retelling Our Story of Aging: Reimagining the Future through Community, Research, and Action," invites participants to explore a strength-based, age-positive view of aging and what it will take to support thriving later in life. Spend the day with scholars, community leaders, and storytellers with lived experience as we examine the landscape of older adults in the United States and North Carolina and consider how communities and systems can respond more effectively.

The day will be framed by keynote remarks from Kathy Greenlee, who will offer a national perspective on aging and highlight emerging opportunities to strengthen aging supports through collaboration across communities, research, and systems. Lived experience storytelling and panel discussions will further explore research-informed practices, policy and system factors, and practical approaches for building more inclusive, age-friendly communities. Don't miss this engaging event focused on shifting narratives about aging, strengthening community supports, and identifying actions we can take — individually and collectively — to shape a future where people can thrive as they age.

This year's Legacy Speakers Series is led by the Cares Program within the UNC School of Social Work's Office of Community Engagement and Outreach. We are grateful for the generous support of the Carolina Aging Network (CAN) and the NC AHEC Program.



Agenda:

8:30–9:00

In-person Registration and Breakfast

9:00–9:10

Welcome and Housekeeping:
Cares Director Linda Kendall-Fields

9:10–9:25

Opening Remarks: UNC School of Social Work Dean Ramona Denby-Brinson

9:25–10:10

Opening Keynote: The State of Aging in America – Kathy Greenlee (ADvancing States)

10:10–10:30

Morning break and Exhibitor Tables

10:30–10:40

Becoming Inspired: The Power of Storytelling (Jeff Polish – The Monti)

10:40–10:55

Storyteller 1

10:55–11:55

Panel 1: Becoming Informed — Research to Improve Care and Well-Being

11:55–12:10

Storyteller 2

12:10–1:00

Lunch and Exhibitor Tables (provided for all in-person participants)

1:00–1:10

The Jordan Institute for Families' Caregiving Initiative: JIF Director Sarah Verbiest

1:10–1:30

Storyteller 3

1:30–2:30

Panel 2: Becoming Interested — Leading the Way with Aging Communities

2:30–2:45

Afternoon Break and Exhibitor Tables

2:45–3:00

Storyteller 4

3:00–3:15

Public Service Leadership Program (PSLP) Overview: Associate Dean for Community Engagement and Outreach Kathy Colville

3:15–3:25

Cares Introduction: Senior Community Engagement Specialist in Aging Ali Climo

3:25–3:50

Closing Keynote: Becoming Invested: Moving Forward in an Aging State — Mary Bethel (North Carolina Coalition on Aging)

3:50–4:00

Closing Reflections and Thank You: UNC School of Social Work Dean Ramona Denby-Brinson



Opening Keynote: The State of Aging in America, by Kathy Greenlee



Kathy Greenlee

Greenlee is the senior director for elder justice initiatives for ADvancing States, the national membership organization of state agencies centered on aging, disability, and Medicaid home and community-based services. Her work is focused on elder abuse, adult protective services, guardianship, and rural aging. From 2009 to 2016, she served as assistant secretary for aging at the United States Department of Health & Human Services, a position to which she was appointed by President Barack Obama. During her time at HHS, Greenlee led the team that created the Administration for Community Living and served as that agency's first administrator. Greenlee worked 18 years in the Kansas state government, including serving as the Kansas Secretary for Aging and Kansas Long-Term Care Ombudsman. She is currently a board member and past chair for the National Council on Aging. Greenlee is a University of Kansas graduate, where she received a Bachelor of Science in business administration and a Juris Doctor from the School of Law.

Panel 1: Becoming Informed — Research to Improve Care and Well-Being by Sheryl Zimmerman, Christina Hugenschmidt and Joshua Niznik



Sheryl Zimmerman

Dr. Zimmerman is a University Kenan Distinguished Professor in the UNC School of Social Work; senior research scientist and co-director of the Program on Aging, Chronic Illness, and Long-Term Care in the UNC Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research; and executive director of the national Center for Excellence in Assisted

Living (CEAL@UNC). A nationally recognized leader in assisted living and nursing home research, Dr. Zimmerman has written five books and more than 450 peer-reviewed manuscripts, is editor-in-chief emeritus and senior associate editor of the Journal of Post-Acute and Long-Term Care Medicine, and has received career awards from the National Institute on Aging, the Gerontological Society of America, and the Society for Social Work and Research.



Christina Hugenschmidt

Dr. Hugenschmidt is the Rebecca E. Shaw Professor and director of the Memory Counseling Program and associate professor of gerontology and geriatric medicine at the Wake Forest University School of Medicine in the Sticht Center for Healthy Aging and Alzheimer's Prevention. She is a neuroscientist committed to research that maintains dignity and purpose for older adults across the range of physical and cognitive functions they experience. She co-leads the BioImaging Resource Core of the Wake Forest University School of Medicine's Claude Pepper Older Americans Independence Center and is a member of the Wake Forest University School of Medicine's Alzheimer's Disease Research Center.



Joshua Niznik

Dr. Niznik is a pharmacist and health services researcher with expertise in geriatrics and aging research. He has years of experience as an investigator at UNC-Chapel Hill with the School of Medicine's Division of Geriatric Medicine and the Center for Aging and Health, as well as with the Eshelman School of Pharmacy. In his role at the Eshelman School of Pharmacy, he led and collaborated on grants funded by the National Institutes of Health, the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, and private foundations to examine appropriate medication use and deprescribing. He is currently a scientist and senior manager for real world evidence with Chiesi USA.

Panel 2: Becoming Interested — Leading the Way with Aging Communities with George Barrett, Ryan Lavalley, Janice Tyler and Leiha Edmonds



George Barrett

Barrett is the executive director of the Marian Cheek Jackson Center for Saving and Making History, a community-rooted organization dedicated to preserving and strengthening the historically Black neighborhoods of Chapel Hill and Carrboro, including Northside, Pine Knolls, and Tin-Top. Under Barrett's guidance, the Jackson Center advances housing justice through property tax support, home repair initiatives, and community-driven land-banking efforts to prevent displacement. It also maintains a robust oral history archive and leads intergenerational programs that connect residents, students, and elders in shared learning and community building. Through public history projects, neighborhood events, and cultural celebrations, Barrett supports the center's broader goal: honoring the legacy of historically Black communities while ensuring they remain vibrant, connected, and empowered places to live.



Ryan Lavalley

Dr. Lavalley is the founder and primary lead of the Community Practice Lab in the UNC School of Medicine's Department of Health Sciences. He has worked as a community occupational therapist since 2014, providing and developing programming most often related to aging, dementia, and housing. His research focuses on community program development, social models of aging, and socio-historical analysis of health inequities. Dr. Lavalley is also the current coordinator of the Carolina Aging Network, which connects academic aging-related resources and initiatives across Carolina institutions.



Janice Tyler

Tyler is the director of the Orange County Department on Aging and is celebrating 39 years with the department. She is a leader in North Carolina's aging network, having served on the North Carolina Association on Aging board since 2011, including a stint as president from 2014 to 2016. In 2025, she received the Pioneer Award from the North Carolina Coalition on Aging in recognition of her outstanding contributions in the field of aging at the local, state, and national levels. She is a member of the Southern Gerontological Society, the American Society on Aging, the National Council on Aging, and the National Institute of Senior Centers.



Leiha Edmonds

Dr. Edmonds is an assistant professor of geography at Indiana University Bloomington with a joint appointment in the Human Biology Program. Her research focuses on the challenges of aging well in United States cities, with particular attention to caregiving, age-friendly policies, and housing stability. Dr. Edmonds integrates qualitative and spatial data to examine how aging is shaped by place, political economy, and community. Her research includes collaborations with community-based, age-friendly initiatives, including leading the evaluation of Orange County's Master Aging Plan. Dr. Edmonds received her Ph.D. in geography and environment from UNC-Chapel Hill and holds a Master of Urban Planning and Policy from the University of Illinois Chicago.



Closing Keynote: Becoming Invested: Moving Forward in an Aging State by Mary Bethel (North Carolina Coalition on Aging)



Mary Bethel

Bethel worked in North Carolina for more than 40 years in a variety of direct services, administrative, supervisory, advocacy, and policy roles to address challenges faced by older adults and create opportunities for successful aging. She's received multiple honors throughout her career, including being honored in 2021 as a pioneer in the field of aging in North Carolina and receiving AARP North Carolina's top national advocacy award. In her retirement, she serves on numerous boards, advisory committees, and work groups related to aging, health, and community services, including the Governor's Advisory Council on Aging and as the chair for the board of the North Carolina Coalition on Aging. She is the co-lead for the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services' Multi-Sector Plan for Aging, entitled "All Ages, All Stages NC."

Additional Presenters



Ramona Denby-Brinson

Dr. Denby-Brinson was named dean of the UNC School of Social Work in 2021. Previously, she was a professor and associate dean of academic affairs at The Ohio State University College of Social Work. Dr. Denby-Brinson has taught social work for more than 27 years and served 17 years in academic administration. Creating access to education for diverse students and advancing their success has been a critical mission throughout her career. Prior to joining academia, she was a social worker serving children and families in various social service settings, including medical social work, substance use disorders counseling, family counseling, and public guardianship.



Sarah Verbiest

Dr. Verbiest has more than 28 years of expertise, leadership, and research in maternal, child, and family well-being. Dr. Verbiest is the director of the Jordan Institute for Families at the UNC School of Social Work, where she is also a professor. She supervises programs that serve clinics across North Carolina, works on policy teams such as the North Carolina General Assembly's Child Fatality Task Force, holds a robust research portfolio, and has convened statewide coalitions to address maternal and infant mortality disparities.



Linda Kendall-Fields

Kendall-Fields has been at the UNC School of Social Work since 2015 as a clinical associate professor and current director of Cares. With over four decades of experience, she has passionately led programs and built communities that address the needs and recognize the contributions of older adults, people with disabilities, and families across healthcare, government, and higher education in Minnesota, Oregon, Ohio, Georgia, and North Carolina.



Tanya M. Richmond

Richmond is the owner and senior partner of Support Development Associates, LLC, with more than 30 years of experience in clinical social work, program leadership, and evaluation. A certified death doula, she helps individuals and families plan for end-of-life with dignity and agency. Richmond brings deep expertise in person-centered practice across aging, behavioral health, developmental and cognitive disabilities, and crisis response, and has supported this work nationally and internationally, including through current efforts in American Samoa.

Additional Presenters



Kathy Colville

Dr. Colville serves as the UNC School of Social Work's associate dean of community engagement and outreach, a strategic initiative

designed to foster collaboration among diverse parties within the community, university, and School of Social Work while cultivating dynamic partnerships to overcome the complex challenges we face together. Dr. Colville has worked for decades in North Carolina communities in public health, public schools, and on human services boards. She was previously the president and CEO of the North Carolina Institute of Medicine, a nonpartisan statewide health policy organization.



Ali Climo

Dr. Climo serves as a senior community engagement specialist in aging for the Cares program at the UNC School of Social Work and

co-coordinator for the Carolina Aging Network. Through Cares, Dr. Climo is responsible for developing educational and training materials for North Carolina professionals, families, and older adults. She provides leadership and technical assistance in large-scale systems change, including supporting the North Carolina Division of Aging's implementation of the Dementia Capable North Carolina Strategic Plan, and facilitating the Division of Aging's revisioning of its senior center certification program.

Storytellers



Jeff Polish

Dr. Polish is the founder and executive director of The Monti, a nonprofit that creates community through the sharing of stories. Dr. Polish earned a Ph.D. in

molecular cell biology from Washington University in St. Louis. After seven years of teaching, he left science to pursue storytelling as a full-time endeavor. Dr. Polish founded The Monti in 2008. He also consults with businesses and nonprofits on how to communicate effectively through the use of storytelling techniques. Dr. Polish trains frontline health workers around the world to share their stories of navigating health crises in developing communities with limited resources.



Mark and Robin Dawson

Mark comes from a long line of family members who lived — and died — with dementia and movement-related complications, including his grandfather

and two great-aunts; his father and four aunts; and two cousins. Today, he is the only member of his family living with the impacts of a diagnosis of Parkinson's disease with dementia. Mark is a devoted husband and father, holds a Master of Divinity, is the founder and former director of Created4Good, and is an avid woodworker.

Robin, Mark's wife of 36 years, has grown into the role of caregiver through decades of lived experience. She has served as health care power of attorney for five family members, and she and Mark have been caring for their parents since 2005. She also understands both sides of caregiving, having lived with an autoimmune disease since age 25. Robin adores her family, delights in her friends, loves the Lord, cheers loudly for her alma mater UNC and the St. Louis Cardinals, and advocates for human dignity.

Special thanks to our storytelling coaches who helped our speakers shape lived experiences into powerful, shareable moments: Steven Giles, Daniela Marciano, Seth Mitchell, and Kate Wirth.



Elmer "Allen" Keesee

Keesee resides in Winston-Salem with his wife, Vanessa. He is an avid fisherman who thoroughly enjoys outdoor life, having been raised in a farming community in

Reidsville, N.C. Keesee is a retired entrepreneur (Allen's Lawn Service), as well as a former employee of Forsyth County and the state of North Carolina. He is a Vietnam Era Veteran, has been awarded a Quilt of Valor, and is scheduled for the June 3, 2026, Honor Flight. Keesee is a certified North Carolina State University extension master gardener and has empowered local communities through sustainable gardening. He also volunteers with the Society of St. Andrew, which works to glean America's fields by feeding the hungry. He and Vanessa are enthusiastic volunteers with multiple organizations, including AARP North Carolina.



Phyllis "Lady Sunshine" Utley

Utley has been an Afro Indigenous literary word artist, researcher, and educator since childhood in school, community, tribal, and faith-based venues. She

follows the traditions of her ancestors and embraces all aspects of her ancestry in North, South, and Central America. She was selected as one of Asheville's hidden influencers in the Mountain Xpress in 2017. The next year, she was delighted to work with her mentor, Nobel Peace Prize winner and Liberian Activist Leymah Gbowee, at Columbia University's Women, Peace and Security Program. She is a proud Ye Iswa People of the River Otter Clan Elder.



Judy McCord

McCord had a robust career supporting, educating, and advocating for all sorts of people and creatures before her

retirement. She resides in Chapel Hill with her husband, Mac. She represents the LGBTQ+ community on the senior resource team with the Orange County Department on Aging and as a co-host for the radio show Out on the Edge, for, by and about queer elders.

Program Facilitators



2026 Legacy Speakers Series Chairperson Annamae Giles

Giles serves as program coordinator at Cares in the UNC School of Social Work. Her responsibilities include

leading operations, project management, and staff supervision for the Cares program. Previously, Giles was a clinical faculty member in the School of Social Work. With almost 30 years of experience spanning both macro and direct social work practice, her expertise includes aging services, health care, and end-of-life care.



2026 Legacy Speakers Series Project Coordinator Kate Wirth

Wirth is excited to graduate in May 2026 with a dual degree Master of

Social Work and Master of Public Health with a concentration in community, management, and policy practice. She is passionate about aging, family caregiving, and age-friendly community initiatives, with a particular interest in policies that support older adults and reduce caregiver burden. A North Carolina native, Wirth received her bachelor's degree in Human Service Studies and Sociology from Elon University in 2023.

Advancing EQUITY
Transforming SYSTEMS
Improving LIVES

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Exhibitor info:

Carolina Aging Network

UNC Center for Aging and Health

Public Service Leadership Program

School of Social Work Office of Community Engagement and Outreach

The Jordan Institute for Families

School of Social Work Practicum Education Office

UNC Cares & Southeast ADA Center

Orange County Department on Aging

North Carolina Division of Aging

AARP

Embodied Labs

NC Money Follows the Person (MFP)

Community Practice Lab, UNC Department of Health Sciences



RECRUIT
TRAIN
RETAIN



About UNC School of Social Work

Founded in 1920, the highly-ranked UNC School of Social Work is one of the oldest professional schools at UNC-Chapel Hill. The school offers two degrees: The Master of Social Work (MSW) and the Ph.D. The school's mission is to advance equity, transform systems, and improve lives. Our students, faculty and staff are committed to understanding the etiology of social problems and to developing and implementing evidence-informed policies and practices that address those problems. This commitment calls us to serve vulnerable and marginalized populations in North Carolina and around the world.

About Cares

Cares is a state and national resource center that advances well-being, self-determination, and community living with and for older adults and people with disabilities. Since 1987, Cares has trained thousands, led statewide initiatives, and shaped policy to support dignity, choice, and inclusion.

Thank you!

We would like to thank the UNC School of Social Work faculty and staff, the Friday Center, and all the exhibitors, presenters, and participants who have made today's conference possible. We hope the ideas and resources shared today will help you thrive in your own life.



We also want to give a special thank you to the members of the Cares team for their help with this year's event. In particular, we want to thank Project Coordinator Kait Bilston and Business Officer Nefi Lopez-Chen, whose work and coordination helped to bring this event together.