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For immediate release
News from the University of Southern Indiana

Alzheimer's course to be offered through Internet

More than 20 years ago, Martha Sparks' mother-in-law was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease.

In 1993, her husband was diagnosed with the same disease; seven years later, her father – who also suffered from Alzheimer's – came to live with her, putting her in a position to care for two Alzheimer's patients at the same time.

"Living with two people with Alzheimer's is a pretty good reason to keep learning about the disease," Sparks said. "It really gives you a new perspective."

Sparks, an associate professor of nursing at the University of Southern Indiana, is preparing to share that perspective with students, in a course developed for the 2006 spring semester. The three-credit-hour course, which will be offered via the Internet, deals with assessing the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease, knowing what to expect from the disease, and managing and knowing how to deal with the disease's symptoms.

It's a subject Sparks knows plenty about. Apart from her personal experiences, Sparks has been doing workshops on Alzheimer's since 1991, and developed a gerontology program at USI in 1999. She gave a presentation about the perceptions of caregivers of persons with Alzheimer's disease at the Oxford Round Table for Successful Aging in August 2005. The Oxford Round Table is held at St. Anne's College in the University of Oxford, England.

The course will be the first in the region to deal directly with Alzheimer's. The goal of the course – which will be offered to students of all majors – is to help people better understand the symptoms of Alzheimer's, and therefore deal better with the disease.

"I want to help give a feeling of the illness and not just cognitive information about it," Sparks said. "If we can understand what to expect, and know why we see the behavior, then our emotions don't get quite so involved, and we can use a more practical approach to caring for the patient."

A second, similar course also is being developed for people already practicing in the field. Those taking the course, Sparks said, will be certified to deal with Alzheimer's, and they also will be able to educate fellow employees.

Sparks developed the course with an \$18,000 grant from the Indiana Partnership for Statewide Education. The grant program supports development of educational content delivered via technology. She holds a doctorate from the University of Texas and joined USI in 1999.

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