“It was the first time a care plan for a patient in the hospital ever made sense to me,” she says. “This patient had been lingering, depressed, kind of wasting away in the hospital bed. Everyone had been focused on getting him out of the hospital. No one spent time talking to him.”

The general internists Fox had worked with were focused on diseases and organ systems; the geriatricians, however, talked extensively to the patient about his home life, including what he enjoyed for breakfast, what kind of shoes he wore, even what he liked to watch on television. Then they accurately diagnosed him with hypothyroidism. He returned to good health. Fox became a geriatrician.

Granieri and Fox began their careers here 10 years ago. They started on the same day and haven’t separated since. The two know each other so well that when one begins a sentence the other can finish it. That close working relationship contributes to their success in caring for elderly patients with multiple needs, as Granieri sees it: “Working as a team is an optimal way to care for frail older adults. We show students you don’t need to be a lone ranger. You can trade on each other’s skills.”

Even if students decide not to become geriatricians, Granieri and Fox make sure they understand what good geriatric care is. Students shadow them in the clinic and on house calls. The duo also organizes formal and less formal didactic sessions and has student groups over to their homes a few times a year. “We’re not shy about showing them what it’s really like. They see us at work and at home,” notes Granieri.

Neil Resnick, chief of geriatrics and gerontology, commends the dedication the two have shown in engaging students at a number of levels. Their success, he says, also stems “from their own passion for teaching and nurturing bright and idealistic young adults who are thrilled to see idealistic role models so happy with the course they’ve chosen.”

This year Granieri received the American Geriatrics Society’s highest honor for advancing geriatrics education; and Pitt’s division has been lauded with awards. A five-year grant from the Jewish Healthcare Foundation will turn the Granieri-Fox duo into an expanding team. Each year, $30,000 will go toward training a faculty fellow—trained geriatricians. Each year, a mere 125 physicians specialize in geriatrics—fewer than 10 of those pursue careers in research. “We desperately need to train scientists who can do research in geriatrics,” says Neil Resnick, chief of the School of Medicine’s Division of Geriatric Medicine and Gerontology. The John A. Hartford Foundation agrees—and believes that Pitt is a great place to do that training. The foundation has designated Pitt’s division a Center of Excellence in Geriatric Medicine—recognizing its teaching and research accomplishments. Only 21 such centers exist in the country. The $500,000 grant accompanying the designation will help train tomorrow’s geriatrics researchers and educators. –DH