Kathy Thompson, LVN, is an instructor at the Health Academy at La Sierra High School in Riverside, CA. A partnership with the county office, the high school, Kaiser Permanente and local universities and colleges, the academy has been in place since 1991 as a way to offer health care pathway training to students who may not otherwise have exposure to these careers. Thompson’s senior students spend the fall semester at the school learning how to care for patients, then spend four days a week at the local hospital in various departments alongside health care professionals.

“I very much like the hands-on activities that drive home the realities of aging,” Thompson explained. “When working with adolescents, they are so invincible. It is good for them to experience the vulnerability of the elderly and for them to live in their shoes, even if for a class period.”

In the spring of 2018, she saw Realityworks’ Geriatric Sensory Impairment Kit and Geriatric Medication Management Simulation Kit in action at the California Educating for Careers conference and decided they would be a good addition to her program. Designed for secondary and post-secondary education programs, these kits allow users to experience a variety of age-related physical challenges. The director of the program saw Thompson’s enthusiasm for the geriatric training simulators and was able to support the addition to the program thanks to available finances through grant funds.
“At 17 or 18, the students have no real concept of what it is like to age,” Thompson observed. “Students were hesitant to even touch the elderly and could not relate to their circumstances of living. I had no way to help prepare them for this part of the experience.”

Thompson made a two-week unit using the two kits and the accompanying curricula. She addresses one lesson per class; student must take notes during a slide presentation, experience the impact of the specific condition and reflect on the impact.

“There is definitely an element of fun at first,” reflected Thompson. “However, once the students begin to try to complete different tasks, they begin to see the issues of aging in a different light. It is important to keep bringing them back to this reality.”

Administrators, staff and even student teachers have come into her classroom to observe the activities and see the students’ reactions to the simulation kits. They have noted how excited students are to participate and how strongly they are impacted by the hands-on activities.

“I look at each student as a success, even if they do not decide to go into health care,” said Thompson. “They have discovered something about themselves and have had an amazing opportunity to experience a career first-hand.”