

Aging Happens: 'True North' heads to Village at Valley View

*By Ellen Waldman
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One of the reasons people resist placing their loved ones who have dementia into a facility is that often they're not impressed by the programs. Even if they feel the care will be appropriate, it's the level of engagement and stimulation that concerns them.

Enter a brand-new program starting in Ashland at the Village at Valley View Memory Care Community (villagevalleyview.com; 541-482-0888, 1071 West Jackson Road).

To learn about this new approach, I spoke with Jean Garbadon, elder advocate, Eden Alternative educator, and director of education and innovation for Compass Senior Living, the new management company serving the Village. Their program is known as True North. Here's what Jean had to say. (Answers edited for space).

EW: What are these new programs going to offer to residents and their families?

JG: I believe that trusting relationships are the most basic of human needs and the strongest foundation for caring for one another. Based on this belief, we developed dementia-specific programming that facilitates human connection. Some of our True North programs include:

Tiny Stories — Becoming well-known is essential to making connections with others. We harvest moments of wisdom, humor, and stories in audio format to share with our care teams and families.

#Gen2000 — Our teen volunteer program closes the age gap between young people and their elders, as they come together to learn how to stay connected to the world and to family through technology.

Circle of Friends — Circle of Friends is a validation circle based on empathetic communication techniques and the basic human needs of all humans. In Circle of Friends we remember how to connect and listen.

Music Makes Memories — We are thrilled with the positive results of our Music Makes Memories project. Our brains are hard-wired to connect music with long-term memory. We provide headphones and an MP3 player, and we collaborate with the elder and family members to download playlists individualized for each person.

True North Yoga — Studies have shown that yoga has a number of health benefits including benefit to the brain, increased flexibility, stress relief, a social connection to others, and an overall feeling of well-being. Participants practice postures and positive intentions from a chair that bring healing and strengthening to the body.

EW: Can you please explain a bit more about the Music Makes Memories program?

JG: I have seen dramatic and immediate results from this program. I found that when we downloaded music that was familiar to an elder when he or she was between the ages of 8–25, that after 30 minutes,

we could remove the headphones and the person could recall memories of that time frame, and for a moment they were present.

The result does not cure the damage done to the brain — it stimulates the brain, and for a time, the person is whole and present. The therapeutic impact is the power of making a human connection and having a conversation with the person after their limbic brain has been stimulated by the familiar tunes.

EW: What do we know about the needs of people with dementia that these programs will address?

JG: We know that those living with dementia are whole, capable human beings, deserving of love, respect and connection. It is our role to facilitate connections with them and their loved ones in new ways. The societal stigma of dementia creates a loss of identity, not only for the person living with the illness, but for loved ones as well. Given the crisis in identity brought on by the experience of dementia, it is not surprising that connections are seriously challenged, often from the day the diagnosis is spoken out loud.

Without connection, the person living with dementia is subject to plagues of the human spirit — loneliness, helplessness, and boredom. Our True North programs are designed to eradicate these plagues and support a life worth living within a culture of caring.

EW: What other information would be important for us to know about this program?

JG: Our approach and our programs were inspired by the care teams, families and elders who have been our muse and teachers over the last 20 years. We are continually evolving, learning, and seeking to be the best versions of ourselves that we can be.

To learn more about dementia support groups and education, the Compass True North Programs, our empathetic communication techniques, and person-centered, elder directed programs, please contact me directly at jgarboden@compass-living.com. To learn more, check out the True North Elderhood Blog at truenorthelderhood.wordpress.com.

We all long for the day when this brain disease no longer challenges our families, friends, and communities. Until then, we can feel supported by these innovative and proven programs that offer some real relief and enjoyment.