

AGING WELL

Unlocking the past for seniors with dementia

By JOANNE MALLETA, LSW

Janet, 87, who hails from New Orleans, looked out her window at a bleak Illinois sky. She was daydreaming about Mardi Gras, which she celebrated nearly every year when she lived in the Big Easy.

When Fat Tuesday rolled around, Janet's certified nursing assistant, Nita Gaston, decided to parade around the memory support halls in a sparkly purple mask and bright green robe. Getting the rest of the staff into the act with Cajun-themed food and jazz music filling the air, she succeeded in making Janet feel like a queen.

"Even though Janet has middle-stage Alzheimer's Disease, she can still remember how it feels to celebrate something that meant so much to her," Gaston said. Her approach is called person-centered care and its main principle is finding what an individual likes and tailoring the relationship around those trademarks.

For example, if a person loves the symphony, a caregiver could make their day by playing classical music and talking about his or her favorite composers. Or, if he or she was an editor, passing along a research paper to proof read might remind them of a time they fondly remember. Undoubtedly, those who have impaired memories can still continue to have passions, especially through the encouragement of those around them.

Retro thinking

Yesterday's medical model of care by-passed these important relationship aspects which betrays the spirit of service.

Unfortunately, American culture is too often geared toward youth — and older adults are often-times thought to contribute very little. After all, they move their bodies slowly, they're not as "with it" mentally anymore, or they're depicted as being incapable of making sound decisions.

Until a cure is unearthed for Alzheimer's Disease and other forms of dementia, some professionals think they can only provide a safe environment that curbs physical pain and suffering. Emphasis is placed on treating residents' weaknesses rather than developing their strengths.

Making headway

It is, however, recognized more and more in the senior living industry that quality of life, choice and decision-making are fundamentals to providing a best practice approach. The Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1987 (OBRA) directs nursing facilities to provide care "in a manner and in an environment that maintains or enhances each resident's dignity and respect in full recognition of his or her individuality."

And, researchers from Project RELATE (Research and Education for Living with Alzheimer's Disease and other Dementias: Therapeutic Elder-care) found that it was important to improve staff's knowledge of the individual resident with whom they were working.

An organization seeking to adopt a person-centered model of care must first make a significant commitment to cultural change. Staff needs to work together to understand that it's worth it to get inside a resident's head. Heightened aware-

ness, empathy and understanding perceptions are some of the keys that unlock the culture changes necessary to reach a person-centered care model.

One-on-one

One of the cornerstones of person-centered care is permanently assigned staff, which results in stronger personal relationships because there's an investment of time and a familiarity which comforts older adults.

"I think of 'my' residents like family. I see them every day. I know what kind of ice cream Lilly loves, and I know that on Sundays Sam likes to do a jigsaw puzzle," Gaston said, who was chosen in 2006 to speak at national senior living industry conference about her experiences caring for residents with memory loss. "I know all of this in addition to what's written on their medical charts, and I think of these details as equally important."

Janet, who used to keep to herself and not attend any of the residence's lectures or art classes, was moved by the Mardi Gras extravaganza in her honor. Now, the garden and French art have more meaning to her.

"She believes she's 35 years old, and I let her think that," Gaston said. "We're not saying things to Janet or doing things for her. We're talking with her, working with her. Person-centered care begins with this vocabulary shift."

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