



LIFE IS JUST GETTING STARTED

At 84, Greg Robertson is determined to get the most out of life each and every day. But he isn't alone. He intends for his wife, who has dementia, to celebrate every day as well. Mr. Robertson knew he could no longer care for his wife on his own so together they entered assisted living.

When Shavano Park Senior Living opened, he discovered to his delight how an assisted living center could become home.

"I have been a pastor my whole life and we were looking for a place that takes in quality of life. We think people who want to get the most out of the day should plant flowers, read a book, have a discussion, sing! It was clear from the outset that Shavano Park wanted the same thing."

Most assisted living facilities look similar from the outside and the inside. For example, common rooms often look more like preschools than social gathering spaces for distinguished elder adults. The staffs at these facilities often consider a day that goes along as scheduled,



without disruption, to be a good day. Mr. Robertson believes a day without at least a little spontaneity represents an opportunity lost.

"Life doesn't end in an assisted living community," Mr. Robertson declares. "It is one thing to come up with the resources, but how do you motivate people to do it? A number of people here may have Parkinson's or other diseases, but how do we make our life more vibrant with our conditions, not crippled because of our conditions?"

Mr. Robertson cites the work of Kevin Van Orman, Vibrant Life Director at Shavano Park, with helping residents main-

tain a purposeful lifestyle. "One way of describing what Kevin does, in addition to engendering dignity and purpose, is acknowledgement that each one of us has a story to tell from our lives. He encourages us to not only tell our stories, but encourages us to make new stories."

Mr. Robertson recalls watching Kevin work with one resident who has dementia and rarely spoke or engaged with others. Her daughter mentioned how much she once loved to fly. Kevin arranged to have her taken out with an instructor where she could fly in and pilot a single engine prop plane.

"Flying a plane illustrates how they can re-experience their joys," enthuses Mr. Robertson, who was invited by the Shavano Park staff to serve as campus chaplain, connecting residents with multiple area churches.

"I was told on my first job, back in Michigan, that we should never try to be friends with the residents, that we should treat them as patients," Kevin explains. "That sounded really weird to me. I realized quickly that when you look at people as family and friends, you give them dignity. The biggest thing for me became understanding people's worth. They are more likely to trust you, to follow your suggestions for a more active, healthier, and thus enjoyable lifestyle."

Examples of health and enjoyment abound inside the Spanish Mediterranean community, an environment where the staff doesn't wear scrubs, where an astounding 75% of excursion participants are made up of residents from the Memory Care program, and where family members are encouraged to visit 24/7. The dining room and other common spaces are more suggestive of a resort ambience than an eldercare facility.

"We try to avoid kitschy decorations," observes Senior Sales and Marketing Director, Kelly Schwennesen. "This is not a day care; it is a home for our residents. We do not use the term facility either, but rather consider this is a community filled with people who love to work and live here."

Shavano Park residents are becoming well known in the surrounding communities as well. Nearly a quarter of the residents recently followed the whim of one resident and set off to explore the Alamo. Many attend local church services, including one resident with dementia who so loves to sing that she has joined several choirs thanks to Mr. Robertson's connections.

"Even taking residents on a scenic

ride for 20 minutes can open up their world," states Schwennesen. "And it isn't just about the very high-functioning residents. We want to focus on all residents. We've been very lucky to have very few who cannot be taken out. Taking out the residents makes for a huge part of the Shavano Park story."

Mr. Robertson's own wife, a former church organist, so delights in singing sacred music at her church every Sunday that Mr. Robertson has contacted local neural researchers to see if they would be interested in studying how music stimulates the brain.

Music plays a critical role throughout Shavano Park, not as mere background noise, but during karaoke, group sings, and dances. There is a recently installed music system that allows Kevin and his staff to program specific music in each of the common rooms. Shavano Park is also licensed in the Music and Memory Program. Each resident receives a personal iPod where they can download individual music.

"I have two left feet when it comes to dancing," muses Mr. Robertson. "But it's amazing to see the sedentary folks that when the music comes on they move, more than entertainment, they actually start dancing."

"We put on disco music or Michael Jackson and people just dance," adds Kevin. "Dancing is part of our extensive fitness program. I think it's unusual from other places because, in keeping with our Vibrant Life philosophy, we actually work toward real, direct results."

Whether taking a memory care resident bowling, or bringing rescue dogs on community as part of the God's Dogs program, the Shavano Park community believes the possibilities are endless when seniors are treated with dignity and respected for their potential.

"I love to see people do things that other people think they couldn't do, or where they are already limited in their own minds" concludes Kevin. "My personal goal is that people who are here are doing exactly what they would do at their previous home." ■

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