

Young at Heart: Volunteering with a local assisted living community
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Those who know me well know that much of my path was shaped by time spent in the company and care of our senior population. In high school, I helped care for my grandmother and learned first hand about the trials of Alzheimer's disease. During the same time, I also volunteered at a local senior center. These experiences directed me to a future serving others, specifically to pursuing a career in medicine. During college, I began working as a nursing assistant in an assisted living community. I absolutely cherished my time with the residents and enjoyed hearing their stories, cultivating friendships, and playing some small part in brightening their days. However, I also saw that, despite the best efforts of staff, there was never quite enough time to spend with each person. As such, there was the increased possibility of feelings of isolation and loneliness among the community of residents. Therefore, when I was thinking about how I wanted to spend my final summer of medical school, I knew I wanted to find a way to give back to the population that is near to my heart. I partnered with a local assisted living community where I worked in conjunction with the Activity Director to plan supplemental programs that would stimulate the residents mentally, creatively, and socially. I spent one day a week over the course of seven weeks volunteering with this community. Most days, our time would start with a morning muscle warm up followed by a morning activity, lunch, and then a concluding special afternoon event. The activities were a wonderful way to get the residents of the community to engage with one other and with me!

NOODLE BALL

On my first day volunteering, I brought in pool noodles cut in half along with a few blown up balloons. We put on music and sat in a circle where we played "noodle ball," a version of net-less volleyball. The idea of the game is to keep the balloon from hitting the ground using only your pool noodle! The residents and I really got into the spirit of competition in this game, we shared a lot of smiles and laughs. I think it was a great way to get to know the group on my first day, as well as to get everyone moving.

NAIL SALON

Everyone loves to a good spa day! When I was working with the Activity Director in my initial planning, she mentioned that all the women in the community loved to have their nails done. So, I was able to set up a temporary "nail salon" complete with nail filing, hand massages, and a variety of nail polishes. With the help of my mom, who came into town for the event, and fellow Brody Scholar Jessie, we were able to give manicures to around 12-13 residents. Hand massages and nail filing were also available for those who might not want their nails painted. Looking back on the summer, this event was one of my favorites. I will never forget the excitement and gratitude of the ladies who visited us. It was amazing to me that something as

simple as providing a manicure could bring someone so much joy. Often, after having their nails done, the women remarked that the manicure made them feel special, and they were eager to show them off to staff and to family members who were visiting. Additionally, the fifteen minutes or so it took to complete a manicure gave me the chance to get to know each participant personally. I heard stories about their families, careers, and childhoods, all while treating them to the VIP salon experience.

SUMMER CELEBRATION

To kick off the official start of summer, we celebrated with a party! I brought in some fun decorations including photo booth props that the community residents could use to take pictures for their families. We started the event off with a memory game and spent some time reminiscing. While sitting in a circle, we threw a beach ball around, which was labeled with numbers. When you caught it, you said aloud the first number that caught your eye. Then, you had to answer the question about summer that corresponded with your number. These questions ranged from “do you prefer the beach or the pool?” to “what is your favorite summer food?” This was a really fun way to get to know each other and to hear about what summers were like when the residents were growing up. This activity was also valuable because we realized, despite age differences or where we lived, we had all had very similar experiences. We spoke of the fun of catching fireflies and the excitement of jumping through waves at the beach. To cap off the event, I brought fresh watermelon, blueberries, strawberries, chips and dip, cookies, and lemonade. To my surprise, the biggest hit of this event was the watermelon! As it turns out, it had been a long time since most of the residents were able to eat fresh watermelon, and they couldn’t get enough! Though a friendly debate ensued about whether watermelon should be salted or not, everyone agreed that watermelon should definitely be the official fruit of summer.

SEASHELL CRAFT/MUSICAL PERFORMANCE

I wanted to incorporate an activity that included a bit of creativity along with something the participants could display as a keepsake. I decided the best way to do this was to plan a craft with flowerpots and plants. I purchased small terra cotta flowerpots along with an assortment of seashells, rocks, sand, and paint. I also got several varieties of succulents from a local plant nursery. We all had a great time at this event! It was a lot of fun decorating the pots and choosing which plants everyone wanted to keep. It also gave us the chance to discuss our previous experiences gardening. Everyone loved talking about their flower and vegetable gardens and the way they would give away their abundant harvests to family and friends. The succulents were also a hit. Most of the participants were unfamiliar with the plants and loved to look at the different varieties. They took such care with their new plants as I helped them bring the pots to their rooms to choose a sunny spot. In fact, when I came back over the next several weeks, a few of the ladies would insist on bringing me down the hall to look at the progress their plants had

made. To top off an already wonderful day, I was able to enlist the help of several of my musically talented classmates to put on a performance for us in the afternoon. They played violin, piano, and guitar and sang a variety of songs for the residents. Music has a way of reaching everyone, and I witnessed people that I had barely seen crack a smile nod their heads and tap their feet along with the tune. After the performance, my classmates stayed to visit with the group and I loved getting to introduce them to my new friends.

FLOWER ARRANGING

This activity was inspired by an event held at the community where I was previously a nursing assistant. I collected silk flowers of various types, as well as glass beads and mason jars. The residents were able to showcase their creative talents by putting together flower arrangements to place in their rooms. It was amazing the creativity they brought to the activity. In particular, I was impressed by the way that they were not afraid to mix colors and different types of flowers. In the end, we had a few leftover supplies and we used the rest to make arrangements to decorate the common areas of the building, that way the flowers could brighten everyone's day.

NAIL SALON PART II

The nail salon was so popular there had to be a round two! My mom came to help again and this time we were able to serve even more of the residents. Again, I was struck by the pride with which they regarded their new nails and the way that such a simple action could serve to improve the self-esteem and mood of the women. It was a wonderful experience and something I hope to take part in again.

SHAVING CREAM ART/HOMEMADE ICE CREAM

For my last event, I wanted to go out with a (messy) bang. We started the morning with shaving cream art. For this project, you layer liquid watercolors on top of shaving cream to make a pattern. Then, you place a piece of paper on top. When you peel the paper away you are left with a big glob of shaving cream, however, scraping the shaving cream off reveals a vibrant pattern embedded in the paper. The residents had a ton of fun getting messy and creating their art. We had a lot of laughs and, in the end, everyone left with a new masterpiece to display in their rooms. That afternoon, we made homemade ice cream. We added ice cream ingredients to a bag and then shook it up within another bag of salt and ice. It was a bit of a work out, but it was well worth it for the afternoon treat.

Overall, the time I spent with the senior community this summer amounted to more than just a few fun events. Through the generosity of the Brody Scholars Program, I got the opportunity to help bring laughter and joy to a population that is often overlooked. Each day that I visited with the residents, I was struck by the magnitude of wisdom and the collective weight of the life experiences around me.

Many being lifelong Pitt County natives, the residents told me stories about life in Greenville as they knew it growing up and, as a result, I feel a little bit more aware of and embedded in the community around me. Additionally, when speaking with the residents, I always asked about their best memory or most impactful life moment. It never failed that these moments were often about experiences, a trip to another country with a spouse, a dance with a loved one, or even the memory of working alongside siblings on a family farm. Because of these stories and my time spent with this population, I experienced a perspective shift. I am more motivated to slow down and look around me, to enjoy a lunch time conversation with a friend or to let go of the stress of a long day with a walk outside because I have come to realize that these are the memories that make up the fabric of a life well lived. In addition, my fondness for the senior population has grown. I feel privileged to call these residents my friends. Through our discussions, it became clear that human experiences are often timeless, and it was reinforced to me that, above all else, people long to be seen and heard. This is a lesson I will keep in mind as I move forward into my goal of becoming a caring physician.