

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

Four employees of Countryside Manor in Aviston take challenge to live as nursing home residents.

Dr. Richard Carlson, who holds a PhD in psychology and is an accomplished author, has said that nothing builds perspective more than developing compassion for others. And compassion, he said, comes from “the willingness to put yourself in someone else’s shoes, to take the focus off yourself and to imagine what it’s like to be in someone else’s predicament.”

That’s precisely what a handful of employees of Aviston Countrywide Manor did as part of the nursing home’s “Through the Looking Glass” project. Administrator Leslie Pedtke presented the project as a contest, open to all employees, in which the participants would stay at the nursing home as residents. They would sleep in the same rooms, eat the same foods and endure simulated physical and mental challenges similar to what nursing home residents endure. Whoever stayed the longest won a \$500 prize. Pedtke explained that she came up with the idea for a contest last year while she was spending some extensive time with a resident who was dying. “Her family wasn’t here, and I sat with her quite a bit,” Pedtke said. “I could tell how alone she felt, and that’s when I decided that the staff members need to know how it feels to be on that side of the door.”

Four employees signed up for the challenge — certified nurse’s aides (CNAs) Leah Schmit and Kat McCrory, housekeeper Darlene Huelsmann and Chris Ranz, a CNA who is also a nursing student. Their reasons for signing up were similar, yet very personal.

Darlene said she had parents who had lived in nursing homes. “I’m curious how it was for them, and I’m also curious about the residents themselves and how it feels for them.” Leah added, “I’m hoping it will give me a better understanding of what the residents go through and make me feel more empathetic.” While the contestants could not leave the nursing home during their stay, they could bring their laptop computers and cell phones. They all brought their own pillows and blankets, but that did little to ease their inevitable insecurities that come with losing the home life and multiple freedoms they were accustomed to.

Upon being admitted as Countryside Manor residents, the participating staff members were each required to draw a random diagnosis. Kat had congestive heart failure and was required to be on oxygen at all times. Chris was a recent stroke victim and had partial left-side paralysis simulated by wearing a weighted sling. Darlene also had a diagnosis of stroke with left-side weakness. Leah had congestive heart failure with fluid accumulation in her legs which was simulated by wearing weights on both ankles and support hose. Each staff member shared a room with a real nursing home resident, and throughout their stay, they were required to draw slips of paper with different challenges.

For instance, in her first challenge, Kat was told she had been choking on fluids and was required to drink only liquids thickened to the consistency of honey for the day. Leah and Chris both were faced with the problem of incontinent bowel which was simulated by lying in chocolate pudding. In one challenge, Darlene endured incontinent urine with no nurse’s call button in reach. There were many challenges to test their endurance and enhance their perspective of Resident life, such as: wearing vision impaired goggles while taking part in activities like Bingo; missing cigarettes and misplaced eyeglasses; head injuries which required neuro checks every two hours; wearing cloth diapers; using a bed pan for up to six hours; room reassignments; drinking prune juice with every meal; eating pureed food and more.

During one challenge in which she was forced to wear weights for a lengthy period of time, Darlene admits she was almost in tears. “It was very limiting,” she said. “I wanted to quit, but I thought, “Well, they (the residents) can’t quit, so I’m going to stick it out.”

Toward the end of her stay, Darlene commented, “I miss my home, I miss my bed, I miss my freedom. I miss having energy to do things, and I lost a lot of that.” Kat said she found that she was often overcome by a sense of loneliness. “When you’re confined to your bed or a wheelchair it feels like you’re basically by yourself and trying to find something to do,” she said.

In the end, Kat McCrory won the contest living as a nursing home resident for eight days. Four days was the minimum; however, all of the contestants feel that they walked away as winners.

Above all, Chris said he has learned that it’s very important for staff to develop relationships with the residents.” After working here awhile you know pretty much everyone in the building, but you don’t always take the time to talk to them and to get to know them — what they like and don’t like, sharing some of their hardships and concerns,” he said. “So now, as a resident, I can talk to another resident for a full hour or an hour and a half, you really, really get to know them and help them out. It’s obvious that if you know them better, you can better care for them.”

Kat, who normally works the midnight shift, was glad to have the opportunity to witness some of the other shifts at work and to get to know the residents during the day while they’re awake. “I’m going to try to be a little less rushed in my job,” she said. “Try to take time to talk and get to know the residents.” Leah said the experience definitely changes the way she looks at her work. “I hope that everyone tries to spend more quality time with the residents,” she said, “as for myself, I may even visit them once in awhile when I’m off. Some of them are really lonely.” Now that the challenge is over, Pedtke anticipates that the four contestants will share their experiences and new insight with their coworkers. Pedtke has been sharing the experience as well within the long term care community.

Two weeks ago, she made a presentation about the project to the Southwestern Illinois Pioneer Coalition which is focused on culture change in long term care with the major change being person-centered versus task-centered care. “Putting the person before the task,” Pedtke said. She will also be presenting “Through the Looking Glass” to the Pioneer Coalition at the state level in Springfield and has submitted an application to present the project at a national meeting of the Pioneer Coalition scheduled for later this year in Indianapolis.

Pedtke has been administrator at Countryside Manor since 1994 and was recently appointed as a board member of the Illinois Pioneer Coalition. She and her staff have been implementing the coalition’s ideas for culture change in long term care for the past few years.

Pedtke believes “Through the Looking Glass” provided priceless insight, and she is proud of the staff members who took part in the inaugural challenge. “They took it very seriously, and they all had very serious reasons for participating,” she said. “We will absolutely do it again.”