

Celebrating seniors: National Nursing Home Week brings activities and open doors at area facilities

By E.T. Robbins / Correspondent
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Stop by a nursing home this week and you're guaranteed to encounter more than bingo.

Mother's Day marked the beginning of National Nursing Home Week, an annual celebration sponsored by the American Health Care Association honoring the residents, families, staff and volunteers involved in long-term care.

As both a volunteer and nursing home worker, (I currently work part-time at Oak Knoll Healthcare Center in Framingham), I can testify to the importance of creating awareness and appreciation for the 1.5 million seniors and disabled Americans residing in 17,000 nursing facilities nationwide, and for the people who care for them.

The AHCA started National Nursing Home Week in 1967. Alexis Starkey, public relations manager for the AHCA, said the main goal is visibility.

"The week is about our patients and residents first, but we also want people to celebrate the quality care offered in facilities and the compassionate staff who make that care possible."

The organization has a planning guide and product catalog online at www.ahca.org. Ideas include intergenerational dinners, discussions, and "memory boxes," large containers in which residents place special or sentimental objects. They then go around the room and talk about the different emotions the items evoke.

Each year has its own theme. Past themes included "Love is Ageless," "Celebrating the Seasons of Life," and "A Legacy of Quality." "Reflections of a Lifetime" is the theme for this year's festivities, although many facilities are modifying it to fit the requests of residents and staff or to reflect the times.

Carrie Coffey, activities director at Maristhill Nursing and Rehabilitation Center in Waltham, notes the theme for her facility is "Tribute to America."

"We have a huge map of the world that stands 9 feet tall. Residents and staff stick pins on the map indicating where they are from. Many of our residents were born in other countries like Ireland, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Canada and China, yet they all contributed to the melting pot society that makes up America."

An archway of balloons in patriotic colors adorns the Maristhill activities room. The events for the week include a "Strawberry Shortcake Festival," a patriotic luncheon accompanied by an ice cream sundae cart, and a performance by the Liberty Bell Choir.

Coffey adds, "The Activities Department is also presenting a special tribute to our military with the help of residents and staff who have served in the Armed forces."

And, of course, there's Patriotic Big Bucks Bingo.

Oak Knoll Healthcare Center in Framingham kicked off the week with a Mother's Day Tea for residents and family members. Activities Director Linda Spadafora acknowledges the importance of encouraging family

participation through events that are comfortable and welcoming.

"It's about having fun, and not just for the residents and families, but the staff as well," Spadafora says.

Oak Knoll has three entertainers lined up for the week in addition to an ice cream smorgasbord and pizza party.

The fact that National Nursing Home Week began on Mother's Day is no coincidence.

"It always begins on this day. Women make up 80 percent of the nursing home population, and this includes the fine staff as well. So, in some ways it is a bit of a women's issue and what better day to kick it off than Mother's Day," said Starkey.

Charlene O'Brien, activities director for Geriatric Authority of Milford, notes the importance of remembering volunteers throughout the week.

"We're having a luncheon at the nursing home called 'Flowers in Bloom' to honor Geriatric Authority's volunteers, and all those who volunteer in long-term care facilities."

The Geriatric Authority also incorporates patriotism with a "Spirit of America" theme. Residents and staff are encouraged to don red, white and blue, while ubiquitous American events, like the recent Kentucky Derby, inspire things like "Derby Day." Staff will receive black derby hats to decorate. A "derby pie" baking class will take place Wednesday morning followed by an afternoon Mint Julep Tea, where residents will play horseshoes.

The schedule also includes a "Chili Swap," sampling of different chili dishes and exchanging of recipes, the first barbecue of the season, and a day called "Fun in the Sun" complete with sand art and tropical drinks. And what if Mother Nature doesn't cooperate with the plans?

"We'll bring the sunshine inside," O'Brien quipped.

Roberta Moran, activities director for The Ellis Nursing & Rehab Center in Norwood, says she's sticking to the AHCA's "Reflections of a Lifetime" theme.

"It's my favorite theme so far, and I've been working in this field for a decade. It's important to instill pride in residents and what better way to do it than to reflect on what I call 'their century.' We're going to talk about the things they've personally seen in their lives like aviation, automobiles, even computers. We just installed a computer in our office and the residents are excited to learn one more thing."

Other daily discussions will include careers, hobbies, and reflections on today's world and how it has "shrunk" because of technology.

"We're also going to talk about how it's every person's responsibility to create peace within their own community. We're going to start right here in ours by making peace cranes," Moran said.

The AHCA Web site states that origami peace cranes derive from Japanese legend and have "become a symbol of long life, hope, good luck and happiness." Another important aspect of the week is promoting nursing home visits.

"Visits are very important to residents," Starkey said, "and it doesn't have to be limited to family. Anyone can be a volunteer visitor and everyone should."

Starkey added that a brochure called "Tips on Visiting Friends and Relatives" is available free by calling 800-628-8140 or at www.LongTermCareLiving.com, a site sponsored by the AHCA and the National Center for Assisted Living.

Moran noted that many people are nervous about visiting nursing homes. She believes National Nursing Home Week helps to remove the stereotypes associated with these facilities.

"I'm always reminding others that nursing home residents are still the same people they once were. They've just changed their address."