

## Activities with Meaning and Purpose

By Jennifer Brush And Margaret Jarrell

The Montessori philosophy for adults gives older adults the opportunity to grow, engage, love—and most importantly, live. Dr. Maria Montessori wrote that “joy, feeling one's own value, being appreciated and loved by others, feeling useful and capable of production are all factors of enormous value for the human soul” (Montessori, 1987). Montessori is more than an educational model; it is a philosophy of life for people of all ages.

At Amaran, staff focuses on identifying personalized roles, as well as individual and small group activities with the goal of meeting each senior's individual interests and needs. Materials for these activities are neatly organized, labeled, and physically accessible throughout the living area. Staff aspires to guide seniors with these roles and activities with the hope they build new routines, and their skills improve to the point that most are able to enjoy these activities on their own. In a Montessori community, staff may also practice with seniors to help them relearn previous skills or enjoy new ones.

For example, once learning that a senior enjoys gardening, we may invite her to take on the role of watering and caring for the houseplants in the community. This role allows her to make a meaningful contribution to the community, while also encouraging her to move freely and maintain her balance, allowing her to work on fine and gross motor skills, and participating in something familiar. In addition, staff may introduce this senior to other related activities, such as flower arranging or using nomenclature cards with images of flowers.

Montessori nomenclature cards are often used with children for building vocabulary and concepts in all subject areas. Also known as 3-part cards, this material consists of pictures and matching labels; using the materials may help seniors to maintain their ability to read, identify and name objects, and sequence the steps of an activity. Nomenclature cards use something called control cards as a way to help the individual to self-correct without interference from staff.

The goal is for staff to constantly create new materials and activities, as well as facilitate new roles to help meet the needs and interests of seniors. A gentleman in need of stronger fine motor skills for buttoning his shirts – and who previously enjoyed carpentry – may be invited to assemble wooden birdhouses for others to paint or assist the maintenance staff replace switch plates. Using a screwdriver may strengthen his finger muscles, may improve hand eye coordination, and can allow for focused attention. At the same time, it provides the opportunity to practice a previously enjoyed hobby, socialize with others, and make a meaningful contribution to the household.

Just as in a Montessori classroom, a community of seniors may be richer by their diverse interests and skills. Seniors are invited to take on leadership roles in their areas of interest, such as leading a book discussion group or planning the menu for a holiday meal. Just as Montessori classroom teachers guide and support students instead of lecturing to them, Montessori staff guide and support residents instead of doing everything for them. Staff and seniors work shoulder to shoulder as equally valued members of a shared community.

During some recent Montessori projects in long-term care, the author's team collected data that showed significant improvement after implementing the Montessori philosophy:

- Staff reported an increase in job satisfaction. <sup>1,4</sup>
- Residents reported an increase of positive emotions. <sup>1,3</sup>

- Observational research data revealed an increase in positive facial expressions. <sup>3</sup>
- Residents reported an increase in feelings of self-esteem and belonging. <sup>1,3</sup>
- Observational research data indicated increased resident engagement in activities and the life of the community. <sup>1,3,4</sup>

Dr. Montessori called her first classroom the *Casa dei Bambini*, meaning the Children's House. At Amaran we are proud to have created a *Casa degli Anziani*, the Residents Home.

1 Implementation of the Montessori program in assisted living: positive outcomes and challenges. *Journal of Nursing Home Research*, Brush, J., Douglas, N., & Bourgeois, M. (2018)

2 Person-centered, skilled services using a Montessori approach for persons with dementia. *Seminars in Speech and Language*, 39(03), Douglas, N., Brush, J., & Bourgeois, M. (2018)

3 Meaningful Engagement Through Montessori. *Provider*, December 1. Brush, J. & Benigas, J. (2019)

4 The Montessori Approach: Purposeful living in memory care. *LeadingAge Magazine*, March-April 8(2), Brush, J., Simons, C., & Van Y. R. (2018)