

Evergreen House at The Village of Summerville: a Montessori for Aging & Dementia Memory Support Neighborhood

- What is the Montessori for Aging and Dementia Philosophy?

Physician and educator Maria Montessori pioneered a learning system based on the idea that children learn best by “doing” in an environment where all the barriers to active engagement in the education process had been removed. Although she never used this idea to design programs for older adults, there has been much research that led to the creation of the Montessori for Aging and Dementia philosophy. The goal is that persons with dementia are enabled to be as independent as possible, engaged in a meaningful life, doing things they love, with people they love, in a supportive environment. Creating a prepared environment so that residents can be successful is a key element of the philosophy, along with providing individuals with meaningful work, remembering that engagement can happen anywhere and anytime and respecting the individual and their contributions to community life.

- What are the benefits of the philosophy and memory support neighborhood?

All too often memory support programs focus on busy work and shuffling residents from one organized activity to another, keeping them entertained and (hopefully) keeping behaviors under control. The philosophy reminds us that as human beings, we all need a reason to live. We need to have a purpose, and we need to spend our time engaged in things that matter to us as individuals.

As much as someone with dementia loses through the progression of the illness, one of the pieces of memory retained is procedural memory, or muscle memory. Our bodies can remember to do things that our brains can't, as long as it has been practiced over and over again to build that procedural memory. This means that residents in a memory support neighborhood can remember how to peel potatoes, cook scrambled eggs, water plants, take out the trash, say grace before a meal, polish shoes or silver, wipe down counters, sort change, pull weeds, iron shirts and hundreds of other daily tasks. Many dementia-related behaviors are the result of an emotional trigger, such as boredom or fear and participating in busy work won't change that feeling. But engaging a familiar task that contributes to care of self, care of the community or care of others means something to most people and promotes feelings of satisfaction and contentment.

- What sets the first intentional innovative design apart?

At the time, there were no other memory support communities that were designed and built specifically with the philosophy in mind. We were able to create an environment which was specially prepared to promote opportunities for residents to maximize their

independence, utilize current and past skills and live a life of meaning and purpose. The design specifically includes certain colors and contrasts to promote safety, independence and reduce falls, increased natural light to aid vision, art work and signage to support wayfinding, areas for residents to engage in hobbies and projects, and family-style dining, kitchen and outdoor areas where all may socialize and participate in community tasks. Exterior doors are difficult to find and blend into the walls, and resident rooms and bathrooms have black door frames so they can be more easily located.

Simple signage using words and pictures makes a huge difference with resident wayfinding – see example in last question about resident bathrooms.

- What was the goal of implementing this philosophy and building Evergreen House?

The mission of Presbyterian Communities of SC states that we are “dedicated to enriching the quality of life of seniors” and we wanted to ensure that persons with dementia had the opportunity to join us at Evergreen House and live their best life possible. The addition of Evergreen House, as well as the gradual implementation of the philosophy at the other PCSC communities, means that we can better fulfill our mission and a diagnosis or advancement of dementia is not a reason for residents or families to be fearful about “what’s next”.

- Who were the stakeholders? The individuals actively working on the task.
 - Scott Hendrix, architect from McMillan Pazdan Smith
 - Sydney Kershen, interior designer from McMillan Pazdan Smith
 - Boyer Commercial Construction – General Contractor
 - Jennifer Brush, Brush Development/Association Montessori International
 - Franklin Fant, CEO, Presbyterian Communities of SC
 - Mandy Stamper, COO, Presbyterian Communities of SC – research and design process
 - Amy Laughlin, Director of Residential Life, Presbyterian Communities of SC – operational project manager during construction, opening and current

- What were the hidden challenges and lessons learned?

We made the mistake of purchasing large front-loading washing machines and dryers for the resident laundry room. They are raised on pedestals so residents wouldn’t struggle to bend down to load and unload their laundry. But we didn’t think about how the residents wouldn’t recognize these appliances as washing machines and dryers – they have no idea what they are or how to use them. We should have bought regular-sized domestic top-loaders which they would recognize and hopefully be able to use – and saved ourselves some dollars in the process.

Another assumption we made was that our residents wouldn't be able to scale the attractive 9ft fence around about the courtyard. I think we all have the tendency to think about memory support residents as being more physically frail or having challenges with balance or gait – but for a former marine our fence was not a problem. He shimmed right up and over within hours of being part of our community. Thankfully we observed this event in progress and were able to quickly get the resident to a safe space and initiated other interventions to prevent him from trying to climb the fence again.

- How are the care partners at Evergreen House trained differently?

Each care partner has received in-person education from one of the trainers from Brush Development. The focus of the training has been the hands-on implementation of the philosophy: how to use Montessori materials for one-on-one activities with residents, and using the Montessori philosophy for resident-led mealtimes, ADL care and the flow of day. One challenge has been to try to shift the emphasis from serving residents to partnering with residents – for care, for meals and for daily activities and tasks. The hospitality and customer service model has been so deeply instilled in many of our care partners that it has sometimes been a struggle for them to allow residents to help themselves to food or pour their own coffee. When I first brought out the paring knives and guided residents through peeling and dicing potatoes to make a soup, their internal safety warning lights went off! But once the residents began peeling and the care partners observed how quickly and efficiently they could peel (much better than us!), they were able to take a metaphorical step back and support the residents instead of taking over.

We don't use traditional life enrichment calendars either, and that was a change for our entire team! We do post a monthly calendar as required by state regulations, and have one available for family members and friends, but for residents we use a daily list without times. We have intentionally chosen to let the residents set the rhythm of the day, so mealtimes are open, food and snacks are available at all times of the day/night and activities can last 10 minutes or 3 hours, depending on how the residents are responding. We will do all the programs on the daily list, but we're not tied to specific schedule or time frame, as every resident has different needs and days cannot be predicted.

- How has the response been from residents and family members? I.e., results?

Many families were thrilled at the idea of Evergreen House, but doubtful of how Mom, Dad or Great Aunt Suzie would engage in the daily roles and activities. Several suggested that their loved one wouldn't participate or was not social and wouldn't benefit from the family style meals and programs. But how delighted they were when they came to visit and observed Mom offering them a brownie she'd baked, Dad sorting the basket of

screws and nuts, and Great Aunt Suzie reading scripture aloud to the group as part of the church service.

We've also been open for 9 months and have not yet had a single fall in the resident bathrooms. The contrast between the floor, wall and toilet greatly promotes depth perception and residents are not missing the toilet. There's extra light and black, matte, non-slip grab bars. Pictorial signage on the door of every bathroom that can be seen from everywhere in the room also helps with locating the bathroom quickly. I'd call that a success story!