

Salem Lutheran not your typical nursing home

By Maya Mirsky
Correspondent

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It's lunchtime at the Salem Lutheran assisted living center, and a server sets a plate of poached salmon on a table overlooking a courtyard dominated by a bold sculpture of twisted metal ribbon.

It's not the usual thing to see at a home for the elderly and infirm, but Salem Lutheran is part of the Eden Alternative network, a program that tries to decrease loneliness, helplessness and boredom in nursing home life.

"It's what we call the three plagues," said Chris Perna, chief executive officer of the Texas-based nonprofit.

At Salem, there are lectures, "brain training" exercises, trips to concerts, a library, constant visitors and an on-site chapel. Residents' pets pad through the halls, regulated by the residents' "government," which includes a committee on cats.

The activities are part of what sets the Eden philosophy apart, but it's not just about distraction; it's about putting the residents' needs in the forefront by letting them set their own schedule as much as possible.

"It's as simple as when they choose to get out of bed," Perna said.

"We are provided here with wonderful opportunities," said resident Connie Olson.

Olson was asked to go through Eden training at the request of Salem staff, so that a resident would have background in the program. She has praise for the training's focus on listening to the residents' needs and interests.

"The caregiver needs to be flexible," she said.

That's also how

Andra Duncan, director of activities for the more infirm residents at Salem, sees it. Duncan is one of the staff who has taken the three-day intensive training to become an Eden Associate. Now she runs music therapy, scrapbooking, a "racy" reading club and laughter yoga.

"We like to involve our elders in decision-making as much as possible," she said.

And while the residents under her care still have the utilitarian rooms and hospital beds of most nursing homes, attempts have been made to humanize the surroundings, with old photos and art on the walls and large "street" signs instead of hallway numbers.

"This is their home, and we honor that it's their home -- and we're just visitors," Duncan said.

The program also gives decision-making power to the caregivers closest to the elderly residents, which is something that employees like, says Rachel Main, Salem's associate executive director. At Salem, that means staff are allowed to sit and chat with a resident or take a stroll.

"The Eden Alternative is definitely a big reason why many of our employees choose to work here," said Main, citing low turnover.

"You're not just a caregiver, you're a friend," Duncan said.

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Salem Lutheran, which was founded in 1924, has been an Eden Alternative home since 2002 and has just been recertified.

"It's a continuous journey, just like tending a garden," Main said.

According to resident Cindy Brown, not all the home's directors have been equally committed to Eden methods, but she is happy with the current leadership.

"I think the Eden principle is definitely working and is very important," said Cindy Brown over lunch.

Next to her, Jerry Kratz agreed.

"Without it, it would be easier to slack off," he said.

And according to Perna, Salem's recertification shows a commitment to a long but rewarding process.

"This is typically a five- to ten-year proposition for most organizations," he said.

The nonprofit Eden Alternative was founded in 1991 by geriatrician Dr. William Thomas, who was struck by the way his patients in nursing homes seemed to have little to do.

He devised a program focused on giving the elderly in nursing homes more stimulation and control over their own lives. Seventeen years later, Eden Alternative provides training for caregivers and has certified more than 200 nursing homes.

Perna joined six months ago to help the nonprofit expand to new nursing homes and start up a training session for people caring for infirm family members at home. He hopes that the expansion of Eden will create more public awareness.

"Not all nursing homes are created equal these days, and not all nursing homes are a terrible place to live," Perna said.

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