Ashley House comes second in National Association for Providers of Activities for Older People competition

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writes Anabel Unity Sale

Ashley House provides a wide range of activities for residents from golf to building an artificial beach for a day's entertainment. Anabel Unity Sale reports

When Ashley House resident Ivy became very ill during the residential care home's week of special activities it did not stop her taking part. Staff knew she loved honeysuckle and had grown it over the front door of her cottage so they filled her room with honeysuckle and roses, picked from the home's garden. Her windows were opened to let the sunshine in and staff played her a CD of birdsong. On the morning Ivy died her son was at her bedside in her room full of flowers.

For Margaret Powell, manager of Ashley House in Bordon, Hampshire, this epitomises how the care home strives to involve all of its residents in activities in a sensitive manner. "It was wonderful to think we were able to bring Ivy a breath of fresh air before she slipped peacefully away," she says.

Providing meaningful activities for older people is vital for their health and well-being. Earlier this year Ashley House was rewarded for its efforts by coming second in the National Association for Providers of Activities for Older People (Napa) Breath of Fresh Air competition, which encouraged care providers to come up with creative ways for older people to enjoy the outdoors.

Enthusiasm

Ashley House is a purpose-built, two-floored building that accommodates 36 frail older people, 22 of whom have dementia. Powell has managed the home for five years and works closely with its activity co-ordinator to ensure that all staff - and residents - are engaged in the drive to keep them active. "You cannot just have an activities co-ordinator who takes people off into a room to do things, the enthusiasm has to come from the home manager and all the staff as well as the residents," she says.

Powell believes that as well as more formal structured events, daily activities should also be spontaneous. "Activity is sometimes seen as a standalone task people think it has to be all planned out but an activity can be as simple as looking out of the window, stroking pets, seeing children or grandchildren, or just going outside."

Such simple activities gives meaning to people's lives because "they feel occupied and useful", she says.

Bingo and coffee mornings are the activities generally associated with older people living in care homes. While these have their place in Ashley House - one resident takes great pride in being the bingo caller - the care home sometimes likes to do things a little bit differently.

Inspired by Napa's desire to see evidence of older people taking part in rewarding activities, Ashley House struck on the idea of a day at the seaside. Powell says that getting 36 older people and associated staff to the beach was a logistical problem "so we decided to bring the beach to residents". A local builder donated two tonnes of sand and Ashley House's gardener helped Powell and the staff create a beach in the home's back garden, complete with a painted seaside backdrop featuring real seaweed stuck on. Local school children came to the "beach" and interacted with residents, as well as two donkeys from a local sanctuary. Powell says the residents, who relished the opportunity to do something completely out of their routine, really enjoyed the day.

Ashley House also organises activities with residents such as golf, films, supervised cooking, and exploring how the garden changes during the seasons.

Interests and hobbies

The home's activity co-ordinator and Powell visit all residents before they move in and talk to them about their interests and hobbies. Powell says it is important for older people to maintain an active lifestyle especially when they move into a care home.

Emma Smith is a team leader at Ashley House and regularly takes parts in...
activities with residents - including starring in the yearly staff pantomime. She says it is important not to force older people to take part in an activity - be it a group or individual one with a care worker - but to respect what the resident wants to do.

Staff also benefit from taking part in different activities with residents as she herself found out when she helped one client, who used to grow his own vegetables, in the home’s vegetables patch. “I know nothing about gardening and there we were digging up potatoes,” she says.

Next year Ashley House plans to build on its good practice by putting the £500 of garden furniture and £250 cash it was awarded by Napa to use in a new sensory garden.

Click for more on Ashley House

National Association for Providers of Activities for Older People

Top tips

● Get to know residents’ likes and dislikes by conducting a home visit before they move into a care home.

● All activities should be geared to what individuals want to do and should not be forced.

● Ask residents what activities they do and don’t enjoy.

This article is published in the 4 December edition of Community Care magazine under the headline How to keep residents active

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