

Connections in a Time of COVID



Jen Sabaot, Front Porch communications director

When I began working at Front Porch in 2002, I came with experience in advertising and a passion for marketing. I expected to use skills that I had learned over the years and make a difference in an industry that serves older adults. What I didn't expect was the opportunity to evolve as a person through interacting with remarkable people who have survived some unimaginable circumstances and come out stronger and wiser. Fast forward to 2020. I don't even want to say that we are currently facing "challenges" as that might imply possible defeat. What I've learned from many of our residents through their stories of perseverance is that defeat is not an option and rarely is the story ever over when you think it is.

At Front Porch, our business and our passion is inspiring, building and nurturing community. So immediately when the COVID crisis began we had to start asking questions as to what our role should be. How would we continue to meet our residents' needs in this new reality? How would they react when we tell them friends and families would not be able to visit unless medically necessary? How would we continue to be a community when we needed to stay apart? This place of uncertainty and an unknown future is new to most of us. But many of our residents have been in the uncomfortable place of ambiguity and lived to tell about it. They inspire us daily with their stories of hope in the face adversity.



Strength of Community Video Chat Participants

With the support of their executive directors, Life Enrichment teams throughout Front Porch mobilized a virtual engagement think tank. Ideas flew through the electronic sphere and bounced around at unprecedented internal communications speed. Successes and learning experiences were shared. From the Home Office that supports the communities, we needed to implement tools never used before and deploy them faster than ever. This ground-level effort and enthusiasm sparked the Front Porch Communications Team to do things very differently.

One of the most visible and valuable aspects of our work in Communications is telling stories. Temporarily gone were the days when we could phone a resident and schedule an interview in his or her home to capture a story for a newsletter or video. But the show must go on, right? Enter technology. That thing you love or hate. That thing that was always “optional” because in our field of service, face-to-face interactions were the preferred way to collaborate and connect. The dreaded video chat had now become an imperative tool.

Don't like what you look like on screen? Get over it! We forced ourselves to embrace the video chat! We swallowed that uncomfortable feeling of seeing ourselves on screen so that we could make human connections in a time when it was and continues to be a challenge. And guess what? It was glorious!

After a few weeks into California's “Safer at Home” orders, Front Porch's Communications and Emerging Technologies teams joined forces to launch a video chat discussion group called “Strength of Community.” We reached out to our Life Enrichment colleagues and asked “Is this possible?” and they answered with a resounding, “Yes!”. Within days, technology hurdles were conquered, email and digital invitations were sent and an engagement platform was born linking residents and staff from throughout Front Porch.

Our first virtual get-together had some definite technical challenges and an obvious learning curve. We facilitators stumbled a bit here and there while residents patiently coached us along. Clearly, they had already put in more hours on video chat than we expected. Our conversation centered on what our residents have been doing while practicing social distancing in their homes. One resident had been learning how to build a website and another was sewing masks for staff. Still another resident claimed to have been engaging in psychoanalyzing her cat. Those of us listening laughed or exclaimed, “That's genius!”.

As the conversation progressed a chorus of gratitude began to crescendo. Through undertones of sadness and frustration, of missing children and grandchildren and basic human contact, a melody of various moments of delight at individual communities were shared. Books and activities were being delivered. Love letters to staff were being written. Meals and exercise were being brought to front doors and balconies. Choir rehearsals and happy hours were being shared online. Some of these types of engagements would not have been possible outside of a community setting. Residents were grateful for a staff of professionals keeping up-to-speed on all the latest safety precautions, while striving to keep them connected to their community-family. One team member from the Front Porch Home Office burst out with, “We miss you!” and I could feel a sense of pride and gratitude bubbling up among my colleagues that sense of “This is why I'm here.”

Click the links below to watch clips from this first chat:

Topic 1: What new skill or interest have you learned?

Topic 2: Have you rediscovered an old hobby or passion?

Topic 3: What has your community done that was surprisingly delightful?

Topic 4: How would Social Distancing have been different in your previous home?

To watch other chat topics visit our YouTube channel's playlist, Strength of Community Video Chats

-Jen Sabaot, communications director