

Getting to know You: Innovative Program Creates Connections Between Villa Gardens Residents and Staff

While walking through the halls and common areas of Villa Gardens, residents can always count on Life Enrichment Specialist Maria Gallegos for a friendly hello, smile or wave. But because she primarily works at the community's Health Center, she does not get to interact with independent living residents on a deeper level as much as she would like.



A resident and staff member enjoy a get to know you lunch.

Her desire to do so was recently remedied when she joined residents Sally and Russ White for a “Blind Date,” Villa Gardens’ innovative program that pairs residents and staff for a “get to know you better” lunch.

“I see Mr. and Mrs. White all of the time, but I didn’t really know them on a personal level,” Maria said. “I thought they were serious people, but discovered that they both have great senses of humor, particularly with each other. We talked about all sorts of things. She told me about her family and I told her about mine. We definitely found a connection. The more I know about our residents the better I can serve them.”

“Our lunch with Maria was quite wonderful,” Sally said. “She was little shy at first, but after about two minutes we were laughing and telling each other stories. I think it’s important for staff and residents to get to know each other personally. It brings a family atmosphere here.”

“Blind Date” was inaugurated around Valentine’s Day in 2021, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic by Life Enrichment Director Katherine Custodio and her team. At that time, interaction among staff and residents was limited so Katherine drew inspiration from internet dating sites that pair people up based on mutual interests.

“The idea just popped up,” Katherine said. “I thought, why couldn’t this same dating concept translate into something here at Villa. But instead of pairing up people for romantic relationships we would pair them up so they could engage with each other as new friends. We like to think of

innovative ideas to keep residents engaged.”

Interested residents and staff sign up for a casual lunch and Villa’s life enrichment team pairs the participants up. They do not meet until lunch is served. The new friends dine on the terrace, outside of Villa’s bistro lounge, sitting six feet apart and enjoy specially catered meals from local business, in order to support the Pasadena community.

“We particularly encouraged staff who work mostly ‘behind the scenes’ at Villa to sign up for a blind date,” Katherine said. “Sometimes staff who work in the kitchen or on the night shift don’t have a chance to get to know residents as much as they would like and vice versa. We hope bringing people together anonymously would add to the excitement of getting to know someone new and it has.”

To help facilitate conversations, participants are given a list of icebreaker questions. However, after just a few minutes, most said there was no need for help initiating conversations – they seemed to flow naturally.

“At first I was nervous but excited at the same time,” said Pauline Zamora, who works as Villa’s overnight receptionist, when interactions with residents are minimal. “I was paired with Janice Schaefer, a physicist, engineer and retired professor. “What an impressive career she had! But what I remember most is that she was so kind. I felt that she truly wanted to get to know me.”

“Villa set up everything beautifully,” said resident Roberta Lawrence, who was paired with a health center caregiver named Aura. “She told me why she became a caregiver and I told her about my career as an architect. It was a pleasant conversation and when I see her around the community I always remember that day.”

The blind date event proved so popular, it resumed during Valentine’s Day week in February 2022, which is International Friendship Month.

“This event turned out to be so valuable to the community,” Katherine said. “Everyone really enjoyed making connections. This is definitely something positive we created as a result of the pandemic. We feel we will continue our blind date connections for years to come.”