

Summer House at Vista del Monte Offers Innovative, Comforting Environment for Those With Cognitive Issues

The joy of hearing a favorite song. The comfort of smelling cookies baking in the oven. The sense of connection that comes from being with others.

At Summer House, a memory-care neighborhood at Vista del Monte senior living community in Santa Barbara, these sensory experiences are woven into the daily lives of residents living with Alzheimer's and other cognitive challenges.



Some are achieved in the usual way, such as making chocolate chip cookies in the counter-top Otis Spunkmeyer oven located in the multi-purpose room where arts-and-crafts activities take place.

But leading-edge engagement technology plays a role, too. Vista del Monte's work with its partner, the Front Porch Center for Innovation and Wellbeing, is instrumental in bringing the variety of technologies used at Summer House.

Since its debut at Vista del Monte in 2019, the 24-bedroom Summer House has built a reputation as an early adopter in the use of touch screens, virtual reality, music therapy to enhance memory and even an interactive, therapeutic baby harp seal robot named PARO to support residents as they explore different paths to self-expression.

Most recently, Vista del Monte debuted a Sensory Room with a dedicated quiet space where scent, lighting, massage chairs and other elements become tools that can both calm and engage.

"This isn't about technology for technology's sake," said Ali Reynoso, director of health services at Vista del Monte. "It's about technology that helps residents have meaningful interactions."

A prime example is the use of a group-engagement system created by Colorado-based iN2L (short for It's Never Too Late). It features wall-mounted, TV-style touch screens through which Summer House residents can take part in guided quizzes, sing-alongs, travelogues, reminiscing sessions and any of the more than 4,000 other life-enrichment content items in iN2L's targeted library of

programs.

The screens are also used for regularly scheduled group Zoom meetings with UC Santa Barbara students, giving residents a chance to interact with the larger community in a protected environment.

In addition, the iN2L system can be tailored to individual residents, providing personally relevant activities at the tap of a screen.

“We spend a lot of time during the pre-admission process making sure we know residents’ likes and dislikes, what they’ve done in the past and what their occupation was,” Ali said. “All of our caregivers are expected to know a lot about the residents, so we’re not asking them: We’re *participating* with them.”



Many Summer House residents also enjoy interacting with the smaller, personalized touch screens mounted near the doors to each of their private rooms. The iPad-like devices act as digital memory boxes, family photo albums, memo boards — and cameras.

“We’ve found that some of our residents love taking selfies,” said Marlene Godinez, a licensed vocational nurse who also serves as Summer House manager. “One gentleman posts several new ones each day.”

“An exceptional memory care community like Summer House at Vista del Monte is designed to provide peace of mind for families and caregivers, but more importantly to enhance the quality of life for those with Alzheimer’s and dementia,” said Doug Tucker, Vista del Monte’s executive director.

Vista del Monte’s 9.5 acre campus was built in 1964 as a retirement community for teachers, but now welcomes nearly 200 residents from all walks of life. The nonprofit, continuing care community offers a variety of apartment floor plans for independent residents, along with an assisted-living community called Fernbrook as well as offering assisted living services brought directly to their independent living residences.

Summer House is located next to the community’s Wellness Center, giving its residents 24-hour access to an LVN and other services in a setting that is protected, familiar and inspiring.

“This is where all the senses come together in customized, person-centered care,” Ali said.

“Sometimes, those senses help recall comforting feelings from the past. And other times, they open the doors to new possibilities.”