



AgeSong Institute

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From Where I Sit – Part II

by Suzanne Fried, M.A., MFT
Clinical Director, AgeSong at Lakeside Park

In the last few months I have been welcoming a new group of interns to Lakeside Park, our community right on Lake Merritt; the months have flown by and last fall and winter are merely a whisper of memories.

I had mixed feelings as I approached the transition with five interns leaving; they were truly "Warriors of the Heart" and they have touched the hearts of the staff, the elders, their families and friends and my heart, deeply. I feel excited for their excitement of moving on to new internships, and I feel sad that they have left.

It has been a great privilege to share last year with Susan, Jonathan, Ashley, Sam, Robyn, Rei and

Martha. I have grown as a clinical director and learned so very much from them.

I have also learned from my colleagues, staff, caregivers and all who create this heart-focused space that we call AgeSong at Lakeside Park.

An elder said to me recently, "Sue, things change so rapidly, you just can't expect it all to remain the same, why look at me, yesterday I was too tired to get up out of my chair to have lunch and today I feel just fine."

Sadness and joy; acceptance and struggle, letting go and moving on- not easy, but it is life at AgeSong and AgeSong Institute.

www.agesonginstitute.org
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In Their Own Words

written by AgeSong Institute interns



Laughing At Ourselves

by Camilla Busnovetsky, *Intern at AgeSong Institute, San Francisco*

One day, I stopped into Meg's room to accompany her downstairs to Karaoke Group. Upon entering her room, Meg had put on so many layers of clothing that she looked like Santa Claus. I began helping Meg finish getting ready by buttoning one of her many sweaters. Suddenly Meg looked down and stated, "Boy, I look like a real fatty!" Meg and I erupted into raucous laughter, tears coming out of our eyes. At that moment, Meg recognized the absurdity of the situation and was able to laugh at herself with pure acceptance and joy. What if we were all able to laugh at ourselves with that kind of total self-love and acceptance? Perhaps if we stopped worrying so much about being popular, or about being "normal" (whatever that is), we could have a lot more fun and live to be Meg's age, a hustling, bustling 92 years old. Meg reminds me to laugh every day and to lovingly embrace my flaws and differences. Thank goodness there is a Meg in my life!

Who is this Therapist?

by Sharon Burchik, *Intern at AgeSong Institute, San Francisco*

There is a resident that I have the honor of working with who is experiencing strong forgetfulness. Though she is very funny and generally positive, she often speaks as though she is living a time of thrift such as during a war or economic crisis.

One day, while with the client, I was really feeling the stress of all my responsibilities (school, internship, job, family). The client had been discussing an "escape plan" for later that day. She seemed very concerned that I "get out" too. I assured her that I would be ok. She then said "make sure you have enough for you". I assumed she meant supplies so I told her I had plenty of food and water. She corrected me and said "No, make sure you have enough up here [pointing to her temple] for you!" [then pointing to me].

I was amazed that she could sense that I was feeling overwhelmed. She was able to say exactly the right thing for me at that moment. I started to wonder who was giving whom the therapy. That experience humbled me and helps me to stay aware that I am constantly learning from the people who live at AgeSong.





Walking the Path with Our Wise Elders

by Nina “Anin” Utigaard, MFT, REAT, *Clinical Trainer and Supervisor, AgeSong Institute*

One thing has become clear to me after working with the residents and staff of AgeSong and AgeSong Institute for the past 4 years: I am a better person than I was before I started. When I try to explain this to others when I make this proclamation, it is often difficult to find the right words. It’s challenging to describe the metamorphic process that has taken place between my first day working with the elders here and who I am today - four years later. How and why did this change occur? And what is so special about working with elders and the program at AgeSong Institute?

Let me try to explain. It has been a gradual enlightenment. It has crept up on me slowly but deeply, with all the grace of a spotted leopard. It started with the small talks with the aging residents during my rounds on the floor - hearing stories about their youth and the lessons of life, and continued with each touching gesture, smile and connection. I became attached to an adorable and loving community of people who loved nothing more than to spend their every waking hour with those who

showed interest in them. These teachers of life offered their classes whenever you were available.

How could I have known that just by sitting and listening, holding and caressing hands, listening to music, watching movies side by side, painting and drawing along side each other, singing those old favorites together, or walking around the block to catch some rays – that all those experiences would create such a deep connection to the soul. Who would have known that these ventures together would open a gate to a new level of caring for others. It seems so simply, I know. Make no mistake, it has been profound.

I don’t want you to get the wrong idea - I was not a cold or aloof individual before I started here. But there has been a continual and ongoing expansion of my heart, mind and spirit. The elders continue to open my mind to new concepts, encouraging me to explore new possibilities about life, afterlife and the journey bestowed upon each of us. With the elders leading the way, I have looked at the world through

their eyes, and by doing so they have taught me about the gifts of life and the lessons that present themselves if we are awake to see them.

When I started supervising the psychology interns in 2006, I thought my focus would be on watching others grow and learn and that I would be supporting that process. I had no idea that I too would be gaining knowledge and insight. I have received these insights as I watch the tenderness of the caregivers as they lovingly attend to the residents; when I sit with an elder studying a plant, child or photo; and again when I hear stories of another time and place and watch the aging face dance with emotion as they tell the story. These unexpected gifts I received each day have filled my basket of understanding. They have brought me a depth of knowing that you cannot find in any books. I invite you to do the same. Come listen to elders with your ears, eyes, heart and mind. For that is a sure way you will understand what I mean when I say “I am a better person after having worked with our elders.”



My Elders

by Rei Yamada, MFTI, AgeSong at Lakeside Park

"I love you." This is what Mary tells me every time I see her. Mary and I have built a special relationship over this year. One time Mary believed I was her long-time best friend who worked with her in the city as a child advocate. She asked me how my children were doing, so the entire hour I became this friend. From that week on I started greeting her by saying, "Remember, we are best friend?" This is our special greeting that only Mary and I know. Every time I greet her she nods and gives me a big smile.

We have a resident that we thought came from China. I thought it was a good idea to bring her

something related to her culture. I brought in Chinese history books, maps of China, and even a Chinese newspaper. One day Abby looked at the map and shook her head. She didn't look very happy. She mumbled some Chinese words and tried to tell me something. I gave her a pen and she drew a small circle next to the Chinese map, which looked like an island. I went back to the intern's office and looked at the map again. Then I found the spot on the map- it was TAIWAN! I was very excited and brought a map of Taiwan to Abby. She was so happy she nodded at me many times. She was totally present and she had corrected my mistake!

Working with this population of Elders is magical. Some of my residents have lost their speech and mobility. However, I have discovered so many ways that we can communicate with them. We can communicate with our facial expressions, touch, art and just by being with them in the same space.

I have experienced many special moments like this with my residents over the year. We can never assume how much they understand and how much they don't. They surprise me all the time. Every day is different. Some days they are like children and someday they are my mentors. I enjoy every special moment with them.

The generous financial support from individual donors and organizations allow Pacific Institute, through its elder care program AgeSong Institute, to improve the quality of life for Elders and their families served by our residential elder care communities. We are committed to using our communities and programs to help educate the next generation of clinicians, care professionals and therapists in a new approach to elder care that views aging as a resource and not a liability, and to provide valuable research and community outreach that is changing the face of aging.

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