

Alzheimer group home built on love and caring

Unconventional approach proves hugely successful

Alexis Lodge offers residents attentive, affordable care



Helen Henderson

For Mary Vari, it was the smell that hit her first.

In the long search for a caring place to look after her mother, who has Alzheimer's, Vari had become used to the unpleasant odour of disinfectant or, worse, stale urine. Then she came to the door of an unassuming house on Ellesmere Ave. and suddenly everything was different.

"There was a warm, homey smell, like soup simmering on the stove," she says. "I think there was a cake in the oven, too. I'll never forget that. I knew I'd found something special."

What Vari had found was Alexis Lodge, a group retirement home for 20 residents with Alzheimer's and related disorders that rob the brain of the ability to function. It is the very antithesis of the big multinational long-term care chains wooed to Ontario over the eight-year reign of the previous provincial government. But if Health Minister George Smitherman is looking for new models on which to build attentive, affordable community care, this wouldn't be a bad place to start.

What makes Alexis Lodge different?

For one thing, there are no rigid schedules. If you miss breakfast and decide you're hungry later, you'll be fed. If you need to wander the house throughout the night, someone will wander with you.

During the day, there is music and laughter and dancing, a genuine appreciation for the human condition, a respect for the individual.

And there are no physical restraints, even for residents in a stage of illness traditionally characterized by severe behaviour problems. No one is tied into bed. No one is kept subdued by drugs.

"We don't have people sedated," says administrator Christiana Egi. Drugs designed to control behaviour are administered only in a low dose for a very short time "to take the edge off extreme agitation."

When Donna Tarantino's husband Vince first came to live there, "the doctor said he was going to reduce his medication," she says. "I thought: 'Well, we'll see what happens.' But it was fine."

"The dose was reduced again and again until the doctor said he'd like to stop it completely. I didn't think it would work, but it did. Vince was better than he'd ever been."

This does not mean there are no rules at Alexis Lodge. In fact, behind the free-style, homey atmosphere is a carefully constructed environment.

There are the physical safeguards, like an alarm system that monitors all exits, non-skid floors, special bathrooms and close supervision by staff.

But it is the attitude that really sets it apart.

Egi, a registered nurse with a background in psychiatry, is skilled in reading behaviour. Everyone who works there knows how to recognize emotional danger signs and how to respond in ways that defuse potentially explosive situations.

They have all become specialists in geriatric care but "when people ask me what I'm looking for in staff, I tell them the most important thing is a good heart," Egi says.

This is the kind of care that goes far deeper than words.

"My mother doesn't speak any English," says Nahid Khatib Zanjani. "But it doesn't matter. She's very happy here."

It is care that extends right through the palliative stage to the end of life. And it is care that goes far beyond the physical boundaries of the home.

If a resident needs to be hospitalized for a physical ailment, someone from the lodge goes too. "Otherwise, with the stress of the situation, they end up in restraints," Egi says.

When Bette Madill's husband Henry, who had Alzheimer's, was in hospital with pneumonia, "the telephone in his room rang about 2 a.m. one night," Madill recalls. "It was one of the staff at Alexis Lodge wanting to speak to Henry."

"I explained that he had an oxygen mask on and wouldn't be able to respond." But he could listen, so she put the receiver to his ear.



Donna Tarantino, right, gets a kiss from Vince, her husband of 47 years. She says Vince, who lives at Alexis Lodge, doesn't respond to a lot but always gives her a kiss when she asks. Below, a staff member plays ball with residents in the living room of the lodge.



"I don't know what was said but Henry was chucking throughout the call," she says. "A few hours later, he passed away."

To this day, Madill is still a regular visitor to Alexis Lodge because everyone there is like family, she says.

"They take good care of me as well as my mother," says Vari, who like many other relatives, pitches in on many Alexis Lodge projects.

One day, while visiting her mother, Jean Cudmore, Vari stayed late into the night giving the living room a fresh coat of paint. In so doing, she saw the night staff in action, gently guiding restless residents who felt compelled to wander the home in the small hours.

"I've seen this place at all hours and the care is the same," she says.

Despite the glowing testimonials, the concept of a group retirement home is not always easy to sell, Egi says.

Alexis Lodge, a member of the Ontario Residential Care Association, opened its doors in 1999 with room for five residents. Since then it has added the house next

door, linking the two places into one privately owned 20-resident retirement home.

Rates range from \$1,200 to \$2,500 a month for care, room and board.

All residents are pretty well mobile. A few are coping with the cognitive impairment that comes with an acquired brain injury but most have Alzheimer's or a related type of dementia.

If they reach a point where their physical care becomes very com-

plex, involving, say, feeding tubes, they have to move to a facility equipped to handle that extra level of medical care. Otherwise, they have a home for life.

Egi has made a point of getting to know the neighbours, who wave and call out greetings as they go by. She holds regular open houses and also speaks with staff at the nearby school, keeping them up to date with what's going on.

Through fundraisers, like garage and bake sales, the lodge has

Family now happy with father's care

The family of a 78-year-old man say they are happy with the way a Durham nursing home is caring for their father following a dispute over the administration of an anti-psychotic drug.

Janet Turner says the Wynfield nursing home has promised her a written report on its investigation into how her father, Bill Harding, came to be given the drug Risperdal without his family's knowledge.

As the Star has reported over

the past two weeks, Turner says her father's health deteriorated after he was given the drug. "He couldn't remember anything and didn't want to get out of bed. He was very unsteady and extremely slow."

Wynfield administrator Katherine Jackson told the Star she couldn't discuss individual cases but noted that the 172-bed facility always obtains the required consent before administering drugs in non-emergency situa-

raised enough money to sink the shaft for an elevator. It can't yet afford the elevator itself but it's working on it.

It also has bought another house next door and plans to expand as soon as possible, Egi says.

A lot of people deserve credit for the special regard in which Alexis Lodge is held, she says. Among them are Odette Maharaj, of Scarborough Support Services, and Dr. Horne Ing, who takes care of residents' medical needs.

Together they've hit on a formula that draws rave reviews even from some people who have never visited the home.

"My mother is 86 and I took her out recently to have her hair done," says Vari. "The hairdresser commented on how healthy her hair is. Hair is a really good indicator of general health."

When Vince Tarantino had to be hospitalized, "everyone commented on how beautiful and healthy his skin is," says Dorothy Tarantino, amid much laughter and teasing from visitors and staff. "It's true. His skin is like a baby's," she says of her husband of 47 years.

The next open house at Alexis Lodge will include a sale of crafts and baked goods, from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., Saturday, Nov. 29. For more information, call 416-752-1923 or e-mail alexislodge@on.aibn.com.

Of all the lousy bad luck . . .

Guest Column
EVANGELINE MOFFAT

I get a very hesitant phone call. "You should check your kids' heads for lice. They've been exposed."

The kids had all been nestled with their friend in front of the computer. Head to head.

I check. All three heads are louse-free. But I start scratching. The power of suggestion is an awesome thing.

I've got thick unruly curls. They are not conducive to louse-hunting. It takes three long, itchy days to persuade my husband to check my hair. To convince him that just maybe I'm not being ridiculous and that the itch from the suggestion of lice would have worn off by now.

He goes in. "Hmm. Yup that looks like a bug." He's totally unconcerned about it. I react as if I'd just been diagnosed with the plague. He scowls at me. "It's a nuisance. That's all."

My itch increases exponentially at the confirmation of bugs. I envision shaving my head and living in quarantine until the infestation is gone. I know it's just hair. It's just bugs. But . . . gross. I have bugs in my hair. How disgusting. You feel dirty when there are

bugs crawling, living and breeding on you. Knowing that head lice aren't caused by lack of hygiene does not help.

I don't use pesticides on my lawn and I'm not about to use them on my head. I send my husband to the drugstore for an herbal head-lice shampoo, a safe natural treatment that kills lice on contact. Use every other day for 7 to 10 days to avoid re-infestation. Voila. You are lice-free.

I use the shampoo three times in two days. He rechecks my hair. "There's just a couple in here."

Just a couple? Having just a couple of bugs is okay? I frantically douse my head again. Then wash all the towels and bedding for the third time in three days.

I avoid people. I have to tell those who I've come in contact with about it. It's embarrassing but necessary. My neighbour and I had looked over his résumé on my laptop during the week. He just laughs when I tell him. He would. He's almost bald.

But I take heart. Maybe telling people won't be so bad. My daughter sneaks into her friend's house. I stand in their doorway and tell them of my plight. They take a large step backward. It's instinctive. They try to downplay it. But they've done it. I take my daughter home.

"Even my son hangs back when I try to hug him goodnight. 'Do you still have those things in your hair, Mom?'"

I can't handle it. The itch. The embarrassment. The fear that I'm going to share my lice with others. It's time to do more than "gently deal with the little mites." Give me toxins.

I go back to the pharmacy. "You've been using the herbal shampoo for more than three days and you're still finding eggs? It's time to step up the fight."

I couldn't agree more.

My neighbour . . . just laughs when I tell him. He would. He's almost bald.

"You are using the nit comb aren't you? It's essential. The shampoo kills the bugs but is not effective on the eggs. You have to go through her hair with the comb."

He assumes the lice are in my 4-year-old's hair.

"It's not her hair, it's mine," I reluctantly mumble.

"Oh." He's speechless. Mothers aren't supposed to get lice. Just kids. And me.

The warning on the bottle says: "Treatment may make your scalp

itchy." I love it when the treatment creates the same effect as the problem.

It takes my husband a painful hour to go through my bushy hair with the nit comb.

The first time, we're not even speaking to each other. He's mad at me for making a big deal of our new pets, not trusting the first treatment and not assuming that the itch is just a reaction to the shampoo. I'm mad at him for not checking my head sooner, and not understanding why I feel like a leper — one who has done way too much laundry.

I offer to get the shears so he can shave my head and save us both from the hassle of nitpicking. Fortunately, he's more patient and reasonable than I am. With the comb in one hand and the scissors in the other to cut out the tats that just won't co-operate, he goes through my hair strand by strand. I have to sit and trust that he doesn't miss any. It's not easy.

It's Day 7: Tonight's comb-through will determine whether I shave my head, or celebrate — in a crowd.

Writer and editor Evangeline Moffat is a mother of three who lives — lice-free — in Brampton.

Conservative guys get real makeover

► Barclay From C1

"Uh, yes, I suppose."

"Well, we can fix this in a jiffy," says Bob, lifting the paintings off their hooks and throwing them into the back of the pickup. He returns a moment later with a stuffed moose head, and hangs it on the wall. "Bagged that one myself," he says proudly.

Paul, the Alliance cuisine expert, is going through Stan's fridge and pantry. "Hey Stan, what's the deal with all these fruits and vegetables, and what is this? Chicken?"

"Buck buck!" squawks John.

Stan nods. "I like a balanced diet, and I've been trying to cut back on red meat."

"Ooooooh!" the Alliance guys say in unison. Paul, with the help of Bob, lifts a freezer into the house.

"Where can this go?" they ask, and Stan directs them to the basement. Once down there, they show Stan what's inside.

"That's a side of beef in here," they said. "You got your T-bones, you got your sirloins, you got your prime rib, you even got your hamburger. You're fixed for three meals a day, seven days a week."

"Okay," Stan says, meekly.

Art, the Alliance cultural expert, glances at the bookshelves in the basement rec room. "What's all this here? Margaret Laurence, Robertson Davies, Rohinton Mistry? Good god, a biography of Morgentaler? Maybe we can use these to stoke the furnace."

Stan looks all embarrassed. "I haven't read all of them. A couple of them I haven't gotten to yet."

"No Zane Grey? No Louis L'Amour? No Mickey Spillane? Books where men are men and women are busty?"

John, the fashion expert, pushes Stan into a chair, tells him to unlace his Florsheims. "Try these on," he says, and hands Stan a pair of tall, pointy-toed leather boots with stitching on the side.

"They're a little bit tight at the end," Stan says. "I can't wiggle my toes."

The Alliance guys sigh, shake their heads, try to smile.

"You think they're all going to be this difficult?" John asks Bob.

Bob says, "You do what you have to do."

Linwood Barclay's column appears Monday, Friday and Saturday. Reach him by e-mail at lbarclay@thestar.ca.