

Tanglewood Assisted Living Adopts Revolutionary Eco-friendly Senior Care Program

EarthWonders Pilot Program in the Long Term Care and Assisted Living Setting Implemented

At Tanglewood Assisted Living, life is about to get a lot greener. And that's life for everyone associated with Tanglewood - community members, staff, residents and their families. "When seniors move to an assisted living facility, they can begin to feel very isolated and that can have detrimental effects on their physical and mental health," notes Dr. Randal Wojciehoski, a local emergency physician, author, and medical legal consultant, who is both an owner and the Medical Director at the Maple Ridge facilities of Tanglewood. "We want to keep our residents engaged in life. Some of the best ways to do so is to get the community involved with our facilities, to ensure residents play a role in their new home environment, to ensure that staff come to work fully engaged, and that resident families remain connected. The EarthWonders® Ecology of Caring™ initiative is meant to accomplish all these things - and to do so in an ecologically sound manner."

Tanglewood proprietors Jessica Schmidt, Bradley Schmidt, and Dr. Wojciehoski have partnered with EarthWonders' Founders and CEOs Judy Butcher and Patty Dreier to create a sustainable workplace senior care model using EarthWonders' Ecology of Caring. The nature-based program operates on the premise that when nature is integrated into a person's daily life and mindset, that person feels better, works better and lives better. Across the globe, research is underway that supports nature-based wellness and its positive effects on everything from childhood ADHD and coping with stress, to a reduction in depression, blood pressure and violent crime in urban neighborhoods.

The Ecology of Caring will be focused on three distinct areas:

- enhancing how care is provided
- developing landscaped gardens and walks outside the facilities, and bringing more plants and natural images within the facilities
- converting the facilities into green residences with eco-friendly, energy-saving initiatives

According to The National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health, 75 to 90 percent of illness and disease is stress related - making stress a huge contributor to mounting health care costs. "Ask any group of people to pick out the most calming scene they can conjure," states Ms. Butcher, "and 95 percent of people pick out a scene in nature." Adds Ms. Dreier, "There is a growing body of evidence linking nature and health - including nature's restorative influence on psychological health, stress relief, employee productivity, pain and anxiety relief."

"The senior care environment can be very stressful for employees, residents and their families. For residents, they are experiencing a life change and shift in environment and their families experience this stress along with them. For employees, caring for residents can be very demanding," explains Ms. Schmidt, the Administrator of Tanglewood Assisted Living and a professional member of the long-term care industry for over a decade. "The typical employee in healthcare is a young, single mother. There are great demands on an employee's energy level - caring for residents at work then going home to care for one's family and self. I feel a great responsibility to my employees because I know they bring their work home with them emotionally," she adds. "What the Ecology of Caring has shown us is that in order for an employee to form nurturing relationships with our residents, we have to be certain she is nurturing herself as well."

“Research has shown the family unit has the greatest influence on productivity,” explains Ms. Butcher. “By working together to ensure that Tanglewood staff members are re-energized and cared for when they return home, then we know they come to work filled with energy and ready to take care of others.” Adds Ms. Schmidt, “by putting all our energy into building good staff, we intrinsically build good care for our residents. This in turn affects resident family members and, ultimately, the community.”

The first stage of enhancing resident care began with employees participating in a full-day immersion training at the Boston School Forest to learn about nature-based methods of taking care of one’s self and others. “Our Ecology of Caring is - like nature - holistic and simplistic. Our nature-based care methods are centered upon reconnecting with what we already know and who we are by incorporating nature back into our lives. It’s a frame of mind - one in which you simply take more quiet time outdoors, enjoy views of the outdoors, or bring the outdoors in,” explains Ms. Dreier. “Over 50 percent of Americans spend only 14 minutes outdoors - primarily going from one place to another - with only 5 minutes of outdoor leisure time. We’re saying - get outside. Take an outdoor lunch break. When you’re stuck in traffic - instead of fuming - take a look around and admire a bit of green. It truly does make a difference.”

Notes Ms. Schmidt, “At first, everyone at the immersion training was tentative and tense. But everyone left feeling very charged up. Within a week, one of our employees offered to bring residents to her horse farm, another employee brought in herbs from her herb garden, and other staff started working on nature-inspired bulletin boards and shadow boxes.”

“Nature gives us a common language - a way to talk to each other. Rather than seeing someone as an RN, an employee, a doctor or a supervisor, during our training we had people forgetting the roles they play and simply making real social connections by talking about hummingbirds or a green swath of ferns,” notes Ms. Dreier. “It allows you to get personal.”

Ms. Butcher, who has drawn up the landscaping plans for Tanglewood agrees. “It’s about making nature accessible - simply walking outside the door - for everyone. At Tanglewood, it will help residents connect with their families, their former homes, staff, residents, and the community.” Ms. Butcher has developed an outdoor landscape that includes butterfly gardens, an aromatic walled garden, enabling gardens with raised beds for those residents in wheelchairs, and a tranquility area inspired by a recent Alzheimer’s patient that includes an outdoor piece donated by her family. “We will also have a heritage garden filled with plants that residents bring from their former homes. It’s one way in which residents can truly make Tanglewood their home, and it allows them to stay connected with their past by planting for the present and future.” A community garden will accept plant donations from the community and local children’s groups will be invited to spend time with residents in the garden. “When strangers meet, what is one of the most common conversational icebreakers? Discussing the weather. Nature is a way to connect and to bridge generations. A grandchild and grandparent can look up at the full moon, journal, and share nature scrapbooks. It gives generations something common to talk about.”

And those long winter months? “We’ll design the gardens to be eye-catching in winter as well. But it’s also about bringing nature indoors. Residents will enjoy the vegetables they have harvested, we’ll create crafts with pressed flowers, start bonsai projects, create sun catchers, paving stones, birdhouses and birdbaths, and - of course - plan for next year’s garden and prepare seedlings in late spring,” explains Ms. Butcher.

How does this relate to resident care? “When I look outside the facilities and see a staff member sitting with the resident, sipping lemonade and enjoying a warm summer breeze I see relationships developing. Relationships that benefit both parties,” explains Schmidt. Adds Dr. Wojciehoski, “Recent research has shown how important environment is to seniors - especially those suffering from dementia or Alzheimer’s. These patients can progressively become less verbal - unable to effectively communicate - so we need to be able to assess what, within their environment, is most disruptive and what is most calming.” To do so, Tanglewood and EarthWonders have developed a questionnaire as a standard part of the admission process. The questionnaire asks questions such as, ‘What did you do at home to relax?’ or ‘What natural sounds or colors have a calming effect for you?’ “This helps us get in tune with our residents and helps us establish restorative opportunities for our resident population,” explains Ms. Schmidt.

Potential employees must also complete a questionnaire, notes Ms. Schmidt. “It helps us identify those individuals who are capable of incorporating nature-based methods of caring into their own and residents’ lives.”

Reduce, reuse, recycle has also taken on a new depth for staff at Tanglewood. Blinds are left open in winter, and closed during the hottest part of the day in summer, to reduce energy costs. The facilities have converted to eco-friendly light bulbs, are in the process of creating a compost bin that will utilize kitchen and garden scraps, and have switched from disposable cups and napkins to reusable cups and linens. All initiatives preserve the integrity of resident health, while preserving that of the planet.

And what do the proprietors of Tanglewood hope to gain by adopting the Ecology of Caring? Ms. Schmidt explains, “If you want to put it in terms of ‘return on investment,’ we truly believe that by helping our staff acquire balance in their lives, they can better provide care for residents. That means less staff turnover, less staff sick days, an enhanced sense of team dedication and commitment, and a positive energy that resonates throughout the residences.” Adds Dr. Wojciehoski, “We’re going to monitor several clinical outcomes to see if we witness a reduction in need for blood pressure, anxiety, or depression medications.” Tanglewood has also developed a series of benchmarks and will measure specific outcomes over time to determine the impact of this project on the quality of life for residents and the fiscal impact on the business.

“Ultimately, happier residents and staff mean a stronger community. And our eco-friendly practices mean a healthier planet. Yes, we are a small blip on the planet - but big movements begin with small steps. We hope to set an example for others in our community and the senior care industry. At Tanglewood, we believe green is not a luxury - it’s part of a healthy habitat,” concludes Dr. Wojciehoski. For further information, see www.tanglewoodassistingliving.org and www.earthwonders.net

About Tanglewood Assisted Living, Inc.

Tanglewood Assisted Living, Inc. is locally owned and operated by Jessica and Bradley Schmidt, of Plover, Wisconsin, and Dr. Randal Wojciehoski, of Stevens Point. Ms. Schmidt serves as the Administrator, Mr. Schmidt controls Facility Maintenance, and Dr. Wojciehoski serves as Medical Director. Tanglewood Assisted Living serves the aging population of central Wisconsin with excellence in personalized, resident-centered care focused on individual needs within a secure environment. Tanglewood Assisted Living is an alternative to institutional care that supports a resident’s ability to remain as independent as possible while receiving long-term care services.

About Dr. Wojo

Dr. Wojo was born at St. Michael's Hospital in Stevens Point, where he now serves as an Emergency Medicine Physician, and attended Pacelli High School. He attended Marquette University, located in Milwaukee, and completed his medical degrees at The New York College of Podiatric Medicine and the University of New College of Osteopathic Medicine. He completed his residency at Marshfield Clinic in Wisconsin and is board certified in Emergency Medicine and Internal Medicine. Dr. Wojo is an experienced medical expert in legal cases, a syndicated columnist and lecturer. www.drwojo.com.