

## *The Artful Skill of Reminiscence*

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“There were so many of these moments that could never be captured accurately, even in the camcorder, only in the heart.”

~Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, *Now I'll Tell You Everything*

Each person has a distinct need and desire to pass down lifetime memories to the next generation. Memorable moments and experiences have always been strong connectors between people. This paper's main objective presents and supports the value and importance for reminiscence as part of a resident's daily recreational programming. Reminiscence is an art and skill that is readily available to all healthcare professionals. It is also an effective program that helps team members provide and build upon person-centered Quality of Life standards and services. Masterful Recreation/Activity Professionals understand the importance of reminiscence and its dual roles of excellent conversation and active listening. The two roles work in concert; however, conversation and listening doesn't always come naturally to all team members. As Quality of Life champions, our specific roles and responsibilities are held to high standards. We are truly 'Persons of Influence' in our individual health care communities. With that said, learning, practicing and teaching the art of reminiscence to our fellow colleagues is necessary if we wish to remain actively 'in touch' with our residents' lifetime memories and experiences.

Initiating reminiscence programs takes careful, diligent practice. It serves little to no purpose to have Recreation/Activity team members lead reminiscence programs without the appropriate strategies and skill set needed for positive resident satisfaction. So, where do we begin? One of the first stepping stones to a successful and effective reminiscence program is gaining accurate background information of the resident. Attention to detail is key and utilizing all resources in the data-gathering process, including family members and your community team members is important. Input and knowledge from as many resources as possible ensures a successful outcome.

The process of reminiscence provides a varied, creative and absorbing means of communicating with individuals. It establishes communication links that are based on recalling the past, while bringing meaning, congruence, and enjoyment to elders in the present (Ann Rainbow, 2003). Concentrating on each resident's individual history, personality and needs further enhances the communicative process between team member and resident. Think of the following analogy: a coconut has both an outer and inner shell just like us. The outer shell can sometimes be 'a bit tough' protecting the precious inner shell. This inner shell is filled with magical memories, moments and special experiences. Once you reach the inner shell, which I like to call the 'heart of the matter', you have reached the very best part; an oasis of lifetime stories filled with rich and vibrant moments! Jolene Brackey refers to this as *Remember Their Greatness* (Brackey, *Creating Moments of Joy*, 2007, p.36). It is our job as the Recreation/Activity Professional, to

know what sparks that twinkle in their eye; what makes that smile stretch wide from ear to ear; and, what makes the resident not be able to stop talking about their passion.

Following the data-gathering process, begin collecting a sampling of mementos that are unique and person-specific that will act as positive triggers for true reminiscence with the resident. Once again, an important factor to remember is that the more specific and personal the memento, the greater the opportunity for good conversation and resident satisfaction. Throughout this section of the building process, family members and friends become active participants with you and join **“your”** team sharing and supporting the resident’s Quality of Life. Next, the planning for evaluation and feedback is essential to the entire process. Discard anything that will hinder or cause the resident discomfort or frustration. They may not understand the words that come out of your mouth, but they might understand what you put in their hands. We need to give them their stuff back! (Brackey, *Creating Moments of Joy*, 2007, p. 38) And, finally, the Recreation/Activity Professional delivers the reminiscence program. Integrate the following factors throughout the reminiscence program:

- Wear a smiling face – always!
- Use listening ears – showing care, support and encouragement
- Willingly serve each resident with an open heart
- Speak up for the resident that cannot speak for him/herself
- Put the resident’s stories and memories before yours

Take time to make reminiscence a priority in your daily program. Reminiscence is much more than a five-minute room visit or a “walk-by” conversation with a resident in the dining room. Many residents anxiously await that special time spent between the Recreation/Activity Team and themselves; time to share and rekindle memories that bring them joy and happiness. Reminiscence is like our fingerprints. Each person has his/her very own imprint. These imprints are solely that person’s unique marking and nobody else can ever leave that mark on the world!

My wife and I enjoy sitting in the family room after our evening meal and reminiscing about the day’s happenings. She made a comment about my work in recreation/activity programming and education, specifically related to the topic of reminiscence. She innocently said, “We are all just old skin stretched over the kid inside.” I sat there for a moment not really understanding what she said or was referring to in our conversation. Then it hit me! We really are just kids inside, no matter how ‘old’ we get! The emotions, memories, experiences and stories last forever in each one of us!

The words from the song, *Red River Valley* by Marty Robbins, encapsulates the essence of this paper:

*From this valley they say you are leaving  
We shall miss your bright eyes and sweet smile  
For you take with you all of the sunshine  
That has brightened our pathway a while*

*Then come sit by my side if you love me  
Do not hasten to bid me adieu  
Just remember the Red River Valley  
And the cowboy that's loved you so true*

*For a long time, my darlin', I've waited  
For the sweet words you never would say  
Now at last all my fond hopes have vanished  
For they say that you're going away*

*Then come sit by my side if you love me  
Do not hasten to bid me adieu  
Just remember the Red River Valley  
And the cowboy that's loved you so true*

Let's always remember the individuals we serve. The smiles that we exchange. The conversations that take place. And, yes, sharing reminiscence along ***their*** way. All these things make memories come to life!