

Lessons Learned from the Shahbazim

Anthony F. Vicari EdS, AC-BC, ADC/EDU, CADDCT, CDCM, CDP

NAAP Vice President

Eden Alternative Educator and Associate

Legends say that hummingbirds float free of time, carrying our hopes for love, joy and celebration. The hummingbird's delicate grace reminds us that life is rich, beauty is everywhere, every personal connection has meaning and that laughter is life's sweetest creation.

~ Papyrus, Inc.

When hearing the word *Shahbaz* (also commonly referred to as *Shahbazim*) for the very first time, one's ears might perk up a bit accompanied with a puzzled, inquisitive expression appearing across the face. My first reaction to hearing this word, July 2009, happened while attending an Eden Alternative Associate Training in Cedar City, Utah. The experience was both powerfully significant and most memorable. I truly believed, as the presenter spoke *'this word'* that she was introducing a leisure program entertainer and was *over-emphasizing* this brand new *buzzword* for seminar attendees to learn and use during their very own introduction of an activity program. I immediately realized how wrong I was!

Shahbaz, originating from the Persian culture, infers its meaning from a sultan's *hunting falcon*. Freeze-frame that picture for a moment; a *hunting falcon*. Can't you see those careful, diligent and watchful eyes beaming from this grand and glorious creature in action? Now, how you ask, does this *hunting falcon* relate to and have any impact on the Recreation/Activity Professional? The Green House Project, founded in 2003, by Dr. William H. Thomas, is an American national non-profit organization dedicated to creating alternative living environments to the traditional nursing home care facilities. The primary focus and mission of The Green House Project states, "*Caring Homes for Meaningful Lives.*" These living environments reverse the 'enforced dependency' of life in a traditional nursing home by creating small intentional communities designed to foster late-life development and growth (www.greenhouseproject.org). Enter the *Shahbaz*!

Shahbazims provide personal care to all residents living in their particular community. Duties and responsibilities include preparation of meals, housekeeping, assistance with residents' Activities of Daily Living and leading/directing activity programming. The living community typically is designed with a large living/family room, an open dining area, and kitchen. Residents move freely, throughout their day, in each living space. One of the most important roles that the *Shahbaz* is empowered with is making decisions based on the personal care of each resident, working closely with the clinical support team providing person-centered individualized care. This, I believe we all can most certainly agree upon, is one of the key responsibilities of practicing Recreation/Activity Professionals; providing personal person-centered care to each of our residents.

Interestingly, many of today's Recreation/Activity Professionals are working side-by-side with another vitally important health care professional: the Universal Worker. Universal Workers are trained to deliver both Quality of Care and Life services to residents living in all types of senior communities. Specifically, they provide residents with any and all Activities of Daily Living assistance needed. Linda Detring, Chief Operating Officer, Lutheran Senior Services, St. Louis, Missouri, states, "Universal Workers are the pivotal piece in a person-centered model of care." Additionally, workers who can successfully function in different roles, pitch in where needed and deliver on residents' preferences (Debra Wood, R.N., June 2012). The Universal Workers' roles mirror the duties and responsibilities of the Shahbazim including personal care, housekeeping, food preparation/serving and activity programming.

My first-hand experience with the Shahbazim was while working and consulting in a Memory Care Neighborhood in the greater Las Vegas area. This particular Memory Care Neighborhood housed a population of sixteen residents with ten full-time healthcare professionals, total, serving on three different shifts; day, night and noc. The healthcare professionals' official job titles were not identified as Shahbazims. Instead, they were classified as Memory Neighborhood Caregivers; however, their duties, responsibilities and professional roles were identical to that of the Shahbazim; a perfect match.

And, it was here, at this Memory Care Neighborhood, that I learned and gleaned invaluable lessons from the Shahbazim. As stated earlier, each Shahbazim had *power*; *empowerment* to make decisions! The only way to even approach the kind of organizational flexibility required to respond to the individual needs, desires, and pleasures of Elders is through the empowerment of self-directed teams (Nancy Fox, *The Journey of A Lifetime: Leadership Pathways to Culture Change in Long-Term Care*, p. 228, 2007). As Recreation/Activity Professionals, I believe it is imperative that we learn how to empower and lead self-directed teams within our department. As Yoda so eloquently stated, "Always pass on what you have learned." Filling each of our Activity Professional's toolboxes with relevant and proven research and strategies is part of our job. Furthermore, consistent communication and collaboration are critical priorities in the development of self-directed team members. Activity staff should feel both comfortable and trusted to take on responsibility and then, in turn, be accountable for their judgments and actions. None of this will happen until directors let go of their role as 'top dogs' and nurture and model this team approach supported and proven over and over again by The Greenhouse Project. "We need to give those things (knowledge, information, and all the resources) to them, as well as the training and practice they will need to become just as proficient as we are at our jobs" (Nancy Fox, p. 239).

Finally, Recreation/Activity Professionals must remain actively engaged and involved throughout the culture change process. This journey is not easy for any of us; however, the rewards will prove to be most beneficial. By investing in our profession, both now and in the future, with rigorous study, implementation of strategic principles, and embracing the proven practices of the Shahbazim, our Activity Departments will flourish with hope, joy and celebration for all residents.

As the opening quote from *Papyrus, Inc.* states, "...life is rich, beauty is everywhere, every personal connection has meaning and laughter is life's sweetest creation." It is time for all of us to turn our mirrors into windows of learning.