

WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS

Ben Adkins



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Finding a first love is a rite of passage taken by most teenage boys, and Bob Bratcher is no exception. But for Bratcher, that first love was photography. He spent countless hours cultivating the relationship, taking pictures and processing them in the darkroom he and his father built above the den of their home.

Bratcher’s passion for photography traveled

with him overseas after he joined the U.S. Army and was dispatched to post-World War II Germany in the 1950s. Three-day leaves and weekend passes gave him the opportunity to explore, camera in hand.

“I’ve got slides from all over Europe,” he says. “Back then, I was using a Kodak Retina IIIc, I believe it was called. I accidentally left it in a hotel in Dublin.”

For decades, Bratcher, a piano and organ salesman by



Far left: Virginia Risner and Charlotte Zacharski. Center: Risner, Bob Bratcher, Paul Kennedy, Zuba Ledbetter, and Dona Dixon. Left: Ledbetter.

A PHOTOGRAPHY PROGRAM REINVIGORATES RESIDENTS AT A NASHVILLE NURSING FACILITY.



Facing page photo by Bob Bratcher; left photo by Zuba Ledbetter; photo above by Charlotte Zacharski.

trade, spent much of his spare time taking pictures. But the hobby fell by the wayside in later years, until he was able to rekindle that passion when Donelson Place Care & Rehabilitation Center, a 124-bed nursing community in Nashville, Tenn., launched Reflections, a photography program for its residents.

“It gives them a purpose, it gives them something to be excited about,” says Casey Caulk, the facility’s quality of life director. “It’s definitely improved their self-esteem.”

Creative Arts Benefit Residents

Donelson, which is operated by Louisville, Ky.-based Signature HealthCARE, launched the photography program after Angie McAllister, a regional quality of life coordinator

a wellness program.

“I think expression through creative arts is very important to the aging process,” McAllister says. “There is something transformative about the arts in any form. The Reflections program invites elders who are battling with many different disease processes to transform their feelings and thoughts on the world around them into a photograph that gives viewers insight into their personal story. We have seen residents who were diagnosed with dementia begin to actively participate in this program. It opens up the possibilities of learning for those affected with the disease.”

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Far left: light installation, Yellow Tower, photo by Bob Bratcher. Left: performing theatre, photo by Charlotte Zacharski, who has passed since this article was written, but also loved the photography program.

Caulk and other staff members take four or five residents at a time for photo shoots.

Sometimes they pile in the van and visit particular destinations residents have requested, such as Nashville's famed Music Row or Centennial Park, which has a full-scale replica of the Parthenon.

Other times they might just drive, in search of something interesting. "I tried to show them anything could be a great photo," Caulk says.

Costs Are Negligible

Photos are taken using disposable cameras or digital cameras from different departments at the center, making the cost to facilitate the program negligible so far. Katie Beth Hankins, Donelson's therapy manager, helps residents edit their pictures, but Caulk said alterations are limited.

"These photos are originals," she says. "We don't do much to them."

The photos were good enough, in fact, to land a showing for the residents' work last December at Picture This, a custom framing shop and gallery in suburban Nashville. And the

program has garnered media attention from *The Tennessean* and area NBC- and CBS-affiliated TV stations, making some of the residents local celebrities, of sorts, in a town that already has its fair share.

The residents are relishing their newfound notoriety.

"I think it is a fantastic thing," says 69-year-old Paul Kennedy. "That way, we can get this place on the map."

A Wellness Tool

And for Virginia Risner, it has meant independence and self-confidence in the wake of her husband's recent passing. Married at 16, Risner says she spent years as "just a typical housewife, raising my children." She hadn't taken a photo before the program was created.

"It's got me excited," she says. "I'm interested in doing more at [age] 74. My kids are so thrilled that I'm now pursuing, should I say, my career?"

That may well be within the realm of possibility. Already, some Donelson residents have sold framed prints of their photos off the walls of the facility.

An open house is being considered for the future to showcase the residents' work, says Greta Mullinax, Donelson's sales and marketing director. Proceeds from sales could then be used to purchase new digital cameras for the program.

"I'm happy that we can help bring money into the program," Risner says.

The photography program is just part of an already-lively quality-of-life program at Donelson. Outings have included a recent trip to see a glass art exhibit in Nashville, and a couple of residents traveled several hours to visit Graceland in Memphis. Among other events, Donelson hosts a monthly karaoke night—Caulk's and Kennedy's

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rendition of “Summer Nights” is a staple—and the center recently held a Village People-themed masquerade ball.

Not Just Another Activity

The goal is to buck traditional notions of nursing facilities as places where people come to be sick or die.

“We dance, we have fun, we go on trips,” Caulk says. “They should have fun. This is their home.”

Such activities can have a profound

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impact on residents, says Christian Davis Furman, MD, vice chair of geriatric medicine for the University of Louisville’s Department of Family and Geriatric Medicine.

“If they have a reason to get up and a purpose in life, they live longer and they’re happier,” she says.

The key is tailoring activities and quality-of-life programming to the specific needs and desires of individual residents, she says. Preliminary results from research being conducted at the university indicate that meaningful activities help curb depression among nursing facility residents.

“Depression runs rampant in nursing homes, and it’s sometimes, really, not even assessed,” Furman says.

But activities and quality-of-life programs that contribute to the residents’ happiness can have a ripple effect on their overall well-being, she says. Residents who are happier are more inclined to comply with their medication regimen and care plan.

Furman says it all points to “making sure you meet their needs emotionally, spiritually—it’s not just all medical. And it makes a big difference.” ■