

BETHANY LIFE COMMUNITIES—EDEN ALTERNATIVE

Harry Truman summed it up succinctly when he said, "If you want a friend, get a dog." The unconditional affection and loyal companionship of animals is a cornerstone of the Eden Alternative approach in elder care. Eden also emphasizes children and plants to create an environment that helps eliminate loneliness, boredom and helplessness for elders. Keys to accomplish this include spontaneous events in daily life, interaction with kids, animals and plants, and opportunities for residents to provide care or help.

Bethany Manor began introducing Eden Alternative concepts about six years ago. One of the first milestones was a full day of training for all staff members covering the ten principles that were featured in last month's article, along with other Eden approaches. Further, about 8 staff members received several days of in-depth training on Eden. These Eden Associates are catalysts in advancing the Eden culture on a daily basis.

Animals were added after training, and the current count is one dog (Scully), six cats, and numerous parakeets and cockatiels. Scully is probably the most visible of the crew, as she is a large Golden/Chesapeake Retriever cross and can often be found dozing near the front entry. Scully came from a shelter and has the perfect personality for her "assignment". She is a friendly and laid back dog that is not aggressive or territorial. She knows she is going for a daily walk with a staffer at 2:15, so she is punctually stationed at the departure door every day; she also knows which residents are most likely to smuggle occasional table scraps at meal time, so she discreetly meets them for treats. Needless to say, Scully tends to have a weight problem.

In addition to animals, what could be more spontaneous than kids? Under the auspices of Head Start, there are about 14 kids at Bethany Manor Monday through Thursday for half of the day. Bethany provides the space and MICA handles classroom activities. The 4 and 5 year-old pre-schoolers also receive two meals a day and daily interaction with residents from Bethany Manor. This might be reading, working on an art project, or just talking. Regardless, it is usually a mutually rewarding experience.

The blend of children, animals and plants leads to some interesting experiences! Residents still talk about the time a visiting child decided that one of the cats looked hungry and would probably appreciate a fresh fish from the water garden. She took the cat to the water garden and was preparing to try and catch a fish with her bare hands. Meanwhile, Scully couldn't restrain her retriever instincts so she dived into the pond. The cat streaked for cover inside the building, the dog and child were soaked, and the residents had some great laughs as they replayed the episode over and over!

When you think about the animals, kids and plants, you see not only the opportunities for random daily variety, but also the opportunity for elders to give. The adage that it is better to give than receive is affirmed constantly as elders find fulfillment through helping a child, caring for plants, or interacting with an animal.

The Eden Alternative does introduce added costs, but these are not passed on to residents. Fundraisers such as the recent Egg Brunch help. Friends like "Under One Woof", an Ames dog-grooming salon are wonderful. They give Scully a monthly "spa day" free of charge, so she comes back bathed, groomed and ready to go back to work.

The Eden Alternative is proving to be an enriching experience for everyone involved. Residents, kids, and staff are being impacted positively. You've got to believe that Scully figures this is better than her life at the shelter life too!