

Food often 'highlight of day'

Nursing home nothingness

By PHYLIS WEST
Disco music blared from the mahogany television. Smiles faded on the tired worn faces of the over-haired residents, who sat on cushioned, pastel chairs. The music felt out of place as each as I did. I wondered if all volunteers had the same queasy feeling not fitting in.
The residents at Sherwood Health Care Facility, a nursing home located near Bryan High School, seemed comfortable with their lives. They live for their biweekly bingo game, holiday parties and a Train on Saturdays. Most days though they sit strapped to wheelchairs or beds, staring emptily as they wait for their meals. Food is usually the highlight of their day.
Mattie Roy, a resident, expressed her view like a philosophy. "Food is king," she said. "You need food to live. To live, you need food."
The training manual that Sherwood's social and rehabilitative director, Debbie Sulik gave me reinforced her thought. It said: "Of all the experiences that we can have from birth until death, the deepest ones are centered around food."

Sherwood could be described as either an orphanage or a day care center for about 200 elderly people. Billie Carter, assistant social director, said the residents are often like children, and the nurse's aides are their guardians. She even calls some of the residents her babies.
And like children, the residents ask for things that are not good for them or do things that they should not do because they do not know the consequences: asking to be unstrapped from their beds or chairs, diabetes asking for sugar, patients on low sodium diets requesting salt and patients who wheel or walk out of the home and wander away.
No one briefed me on what to expect at Sherwood and I was not prepared to handle these situations. I was signed up as just another of the 100 volunteers (mainly college students, who visit weekly or monthly).
"Most of them are from church groups and others are from veteran's associations," said Sulik. Volunteer enrollment has declined about one-third for some visiting groups, according to records.
My first day (and usually thereafter for a week), I visited residents in the four wings by myself. Remembering my quick lesson on reality orientation, on how to greet and

meet the elderly, I began my visits. Sulik explained reality orientation. She said, "Tell them good morning or good afternoon. Inquire into how their day went. And use their name at least once in the conversation."
Sounds simple. But try asking a resident how well his day was when he has just undergone brain surgery, when he is critically ill and has tubes running from his mouth to his nose, or when his tongue is paralyzed from a stroke.
In many cases I had no guidelines to follow. I knew only one other regular volunteer, but she visited only on Saturdays. So I really did not know what the other volunteers did.
What about asking the staff questions? The fewer the better. Volunteering was not supposed to take much skill, so I was left on my own.
Even the nurses were not very talkative to new volunteers. On occasion I was made to feel like an invader — someone who was spoiling the residents, as one nurse had bluntly remarked.
Isolated. I did not know what to do when a patient asked me to unstrap me from the bed. Frances Woman, a Sherwood resident for the past few years, called me into her room. She sat upright and pouted. She told me to unstrap her ankles. The yellowish cloth belt hurt, she said. Confused, and not seeing any aides, I was about to loosen the belt when Carter happened to enter the room.
"Patients are tied up so that they won't fall off their beds," Carter explained. They are going to ask for a lot of things — just tell them you're going to get someone to help or you'll be back later," she said.
At first I did not know the residents are not allowed on the front grounds unattended, even when

they are capable of moving around the home.
For instance, I was walking into the home, and a resident asked me to hold the door open so she could wheel out. No sooner had I opened the door (and the resident was on the pavement) than an aide ran after her. She retrieved her patient, while giving me a nasty glance.
Runaways are a common occurrence Carter said. Yet I was told nothing of them. One day four people ran away. Vicki Martin, a nurse's aide said. But they were quickly found, she added.
Recently one woman was found far from the home caught in some bushes, Carter said.
The staff members which number over 200 and consist of nurses' aides, nurses, social directors and administrators, seem as distant from the patients as they are from the volunteers. Most on the staff are black, and many of the residents are prejudiced. Many of the elderly grew up in the early 1900s in an era when minorities' rights were often not respected.
The black staff members treat the white residents better than the residents treat the staff, said Carter, a black herself.
But treatment may not be so much a race problem. Other complaints involved late delivery of food, misplaced mail, uncleaned fingernails, noisy halls, bad dental care and very few walks outside, among other things.
Many residents want to go outside, but they have no one to take them for a walk. Their only contact with the outside is often just volunteers like myself. Many held tight to my hand when I talked to them. Touching is very important to them.
Once when I was walking out of a resident's room, she called out to me "Keep in touch."

Economy classes lack money

Economic education is a hot issue still a long way from being implemented in the public school systems of Texas, a Texas Education Agency official said at Texas A&M University Friday.
Louis Grigar, TEA program director for social studies, made the observation in a speech given to the 200 school administrators and teachers attending a conference on membership in free enterprise education sponsored by Texas A&M.
Senate Bill 1040 legislated that the course American Economics be implemented in all curricula in Texas grades 1 through 12, Grigar commented. "The legislature gave us the directive to teach the course, but they did not allocate any money to fund it."
The operation has been a shoe string program since its inception, depending on private funds from

the Small Business Administration and local Chambers of Commerce for its survival," said Grigar.
"We understand the difficulty the school systems of Texas are having with implementation of this program, but we (TEA) are admonishing them to take the first step in implementation."

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