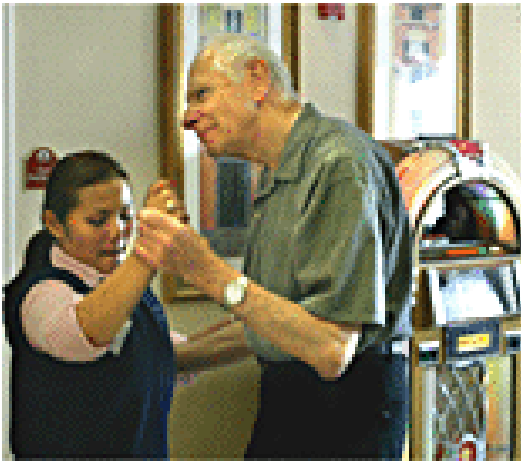


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Innovative Alzheimer's Facility Takes Patients Home... Parc Provence mimics normal life, September 7, 2004, Marianna Riley

## Innovative Alzheimer's facility takes patients "home"

By Marianna Riley  
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Parc Provence activities specialist Lura Duarard and resident Mark Marcus dance to music from a 1950s-style juke box last month. Programs at the new facility aim to help residents establish a link with the past. (Dawn Majors/P-D)

When Jacqueline Haley went to the nursing home to visit her mother, she found her sitting in a wheelchair, unresponsive and with her chin drooping to her chest.

Her mother, Annette Nesbit, 86, has Alzheimer's disease. But she was failing so quickly that Haley was alarmed. "This wasn't my mom," she said. "It got even worse. She was sleeping all the time, wasn't getting out of bed and refusing food. She was losing weight and incontinent."

Nursing home staff recommended that Haley begin hospice care. Haley was devastated; she

had lost her father to Alzheimer's 16 years earlier and she was not ready to give up on her mother. Haley began to explore options and decided on Parc Provence, a new facility in west St. Louis County that offered an innovative model of care and housing for people with Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia.

Nesbit was the first resident when the facility opened in late May. Within a week or two, she showed a dramatic change. She began feeding and grooming herself. She sang for the other residents. When Nesbit and Haley went outside to sit in one of several small gardens, she asked her daughter, "How did I get to this beautiful hotel?"

At its core, Parc Provence is an upscale nursing facility. But through its architecture, activities and surroundings, it helps residents establish a link to the past - which experts say is one of the best ways to keep their minds stimulated in a healthy way. Residents try on clothing from decades past in a costume room. They can stock grocery carts from a realistic "grocery store," push a lawn mower or play a slot machine.

Lining the corridors are old photographs of St. Louis scenes that evoke connections,

conversation and memory sharing.

Activities include baking cookies and kneading bread, which evoke the past for just about everyone, even if the link is in a comforting smell rather than the activity, said David Smith, one of the owners of the residence.

### **Keeping things normal**

Residents of Parc Provence are put together in small "households" according to their abilities and the stage of their dementia.

Each household has its own living room, sunroom, dining room and kitchen. Gardens are shared with an adjacent household. The design means no more than 10 people have dinner at the same time.

And if a resident gets hungry at 2 a.m., he or she can go to the kitchen for a snack. The smaller number of people at meals means fewer distractions and more chances to socialize, said Jennifer Gettman, administrator at Parc Provence. "It's more like the way we've eaten throughout our lifetime," she said.

A long corridor at Parc Provence mimics a Main Street where residents can stroll, stop for coffee or ice cream or play oldies on a jukebox at a "bistro."

It's a popular spot for residents and visitors. Barb Blacksher of Hazelwood sipped wine as she visited her sister, Fran Wolff, who moved to Parc Provence in late June.

Wolff, 56, was diagnosed with Alzheimer's about two years ago. She had retired in 1999 after 29 years of teaching art in public schools.

She is acutely aware she is the youngest resident of Parc Provence. At an average cost of about \$7,000 a month, Wolff can afford the facility only because she bought long-term health care insurance.

Alzheimer's care is costly. The Alzheimer's Association says that nationally, the average cost of nursing home care for a person with Alzheimer's is about \$5,333 a month.

Long-term care insurance policies can help, but their coverage varies. The average policy pays about 75 percent of the cost of assisted living at Parc Provence. For the higher level of care in the skilled living section, such insurance pays about half the cost.

For the most part, Wolff enjoys Parc Provence. "There's always something going on, some sort of stimulus for your brain," she said with a laugh.

Blacksher said her sister was less depressed since moving in.

"She's a ray of sunshine for many of these people," she said. "She really helps them." Smith acknowledges the facility's expense, but he said it could work in a less extravagant version. "If the model works, this could be built" anywhere, he said. "It doesn't have to be this fancy."

The homelike architecture and physical surroundings of Parc Provence won't stop the disease and may not slow its progression, but they will let people maintain maximum functioning, said Stuart Gaines, an expert on environmental design for dementia. He works on public policy issues related to aging for the state of Illinois.

Parc Provence is one of only a few facilities nationwide designed specifically to aid people with dementia. "Besides being very, very pretty, it is set up to help people maintain their functioning," Gaines said.

Environment and programs that mimic normal life are key to any successful program for dealing with dementia, he said.

Benjamin Schwarz is the editor of an international journal called Housing for the Elderly, a professor in the Department of Environmental Design at the University of Missouri at Columbia, and the architect behind Parc Provence.

Design can have an "effect on behavior, but the physical setting by itself cannot determine the behavior of people," he said.

Keeping designs simple so people don't get lost finding their rooms is important, he said, but there also should be opportunities for them to make their own choices while being kept safe and secure.

Safety was why Jack Chasnoff of Clayton brought his wife of 62 years, Alice, to Parc Provence.

"I thought I'd always keep her at home, but I just couldn't keep her safe there," he said. He cared for her at home for five years.

"When she told me, 'Oh, I'm so happy here,' I knew this was the place she needs to be," he said.

**Reporter Marianna Riley**

**E-mail: [mriley@post-dispatch.com](mailto:mriley@post-dispatch.com)**

**Phone: 314-340-8121**