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TIMELESS IN TEXAS

Dallas-area senior living communities are changing how residents connect

Technology, facility design and programming create more opportunities for seniors to develop relationships.

By Helen Bond
6:00 AM on Dec 14, 2022



Residents of The Legacy Senior Communities stay busy with painting classes and other activities planned by a full-time lifestyles director and staff. (Courtesy The Legacy Senior Communities)

LISTEN

Presbyterian Village North resident Pat Mills has a problem — but it's a good one. Between multiple dining options, get-togethers and a host of daily activities available at her independent living community, "there are too many things to do, and you can't do them all," Mills says with a laugh.

To keep up with it all, Mills, who recently turned 93, starts her day with Cubigo, an integrated communications platform designed to help residents, their families and staff stay connected with each other, and the services Presbyterian Village North provides. Mills typically uses her cellphone to access the user-friendly app, where she can catch up on all the community news, sign up for a committee, look over menus for the coming week, request a bus pickup for a doctor's appointment or contact maintenance. On this morning, Mills has already accessed the residential portal's directory to reach out to friends and reserve spots for Saturday brunch.

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Nestled within 66 wooded acres, Presbyterian Village North is part of a vibrant base of Dallas-area senior living communities that are changing the face of aging with a thoughtful approach to well-being, as well as creating a sense of belonging through connection. Being part of a senior living community has allowed Mills to meet people from all over the world whom she “never would have met in a million years.”

A lifelong Dallasite, Mills moved into Presbyterian Village North in 2010 with her husband, after he had experienced a series of falls in their Park Cities home. Mills believes her husband, who had previously lost “all of his fishing and hunting buddies,” lived three years longer than he would have because of the rich new friendships he developed at Presbyterian Village North.

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Mills remains a welcoming face at Presbyterian Village North and makes it her mission to meet and eat with every new resident. “I think it’s important for everybody to be connected,” Mills says. “You need to spend some time individually with people so you can get to know them. I have friends here who are like the best friends I have had in my life that I’ve only known for 10 years — but in some ways, I’ve known them better.”

The pre-pandemic decision to introduce Cubigo into the community, which seems providential now, was initially done to meet the future needs of a new generation of “more tech-savvy seniors,” says Tim Mallad, chief executive officer of Forefront Living, the not-for-profit parent of Presbyterian Village North, which serves 500 residents in all levels of care.

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That all changed with the pandemic, as residents embraced technology of all kinds to stay connected to family and foster friendships within their community. “I always smile when I see the 100-year-old resident who’s on Zoom with me, or on their iPad, emailing or texting,” says Mallad, who estimates more than 90% of independent living residents use Cubigo. “The pandemic really pushed people into that zone where they moved from what was conceptual to utilizing technology that we had in place.”

Cubigo, an integrated communications platform, connects residents, staff and families at Presbyterian Village North. (Courtesy Cubigo)

The clever use of digital tools, chef-prepared cuisine, a full slate of activities, first-class fitness facilities and on-site health care are just a sampling of how area senior living residences foster community for those often most vulnerable to isolation and loneliness.

“Study after study shows that having social connection within a community promotes a healthier lifestyle for older adults,” says Chip Brownlee, executive director of The Legacy Midtown Park in Dallas, part of The Legacy Senior Communities, which also includes The Legacy Willow Bend.

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The Legacy's full-time lifestyles director and staff keep the calendar full of outings, happy hours, parties, card games, a speaker series, ongoing educational events, painting and art classes, spiritual events, and more. Residents can keep up with it all through their portal "Wellzesta."

The architectural design and layout of today's retirement communities are also meant to encourage connection. The Legacy Midtown Park features an abundant use of glass to provide light and bring nature indoors through a beautiful view, and original art acts as conversation pieces inside. An amenity deck off the back of the lobby offers outdoor dining, a graffiti wall for a social media moment, bocce ball, fire pits and a gorgeous fountain.

Residents plant and harvest herbs and vegetables in the chef's garden, which doubles as a place for planting parties and social hours, as well as provides a hearty bounty for use in cooking by the kitchen team.

Residents of The Legacy Midtown Park tend to herbs and vegetables planted in the on-site chef's garden. (Courtesy The Legacy Senior Communities)

Forefront Living's mantra to make "every moment matter" is continually evolving based on residential needs, with more emphasis on customization and meal choice, state-of-the-art exercise equipment, fitness and wellness, and a connection to the outdoors. This feedback has helped to inform the development of Forefront's The Outlook at Windhaven in Plano, set to open in 2024.

"The design of The Outlook brings light and sunshine indoors, and reflects the ability to be able to walk out of the building and connect to nature with walking paths," Mallad says. "There is also a push for more casual things, and spaces that encourage spontaneous conversation or activity."

A focus on personal growth and lifelong learning is also paramount. The innovative pioneer Belmont Senior Living, with communities in seven U.S. states and Mexico City, strives to make every day engaging and purposeful to help seniors thrive and maintain their independence.

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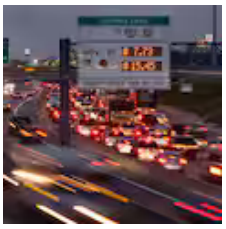
Along with best-in-class hospitality and a renowned whole-brain fitness program, Belmont Village Turtle Creek has long tapped into the "brilliant lives" and expertise of those living within its community and Dallas at large, says Patricia Will, founder and CEO of Houston-based Belmont Senior Living, parent of Belmont Village Turtle Creek. Lectures and discussion groups led by Southern Methodist University and UT Southwestern Medical Center professors, retired military generals, or family members who have expertise "in just about everything" are commonplace.

Will, who founded Belmont Village Senior Living in 1997 and is now a senior herself, says she will never stop looking for ways to innovate to enhance the lives of seniors. "If you come at this as we always have, that this period in the life of aging is a gift and not a burden, then you say, 'What are all the points of leverage that we have?'" Will says. "If you tap into that, whether it's technology or it's analog, you can make a cake that is much better with ingredients that are much better than any of us could think up on our own. I see nothing but possibilities. And I think that's exciting."

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