

Alisa Weg



I have Alzheimer's disease to thank for drawing me to the long-term care field. Although thanking Alzheimer's disease may sound strange, I am so thankful for the circumstances that have influenced me to work in the long-term care field. Working in long-term care was not the initial plan I had for my life; in fact I had a teaching career planned out. After high school, I attended college and earned my Bachelor's degree in secondary education. All throughout my journey to become a teacher there were many signs and events along the way that led me to the activity field. One of the most important signs was Alzheimer's disease and how it impacted me personally.

My Grandmother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease the summer after I graduated from high school. This event was devastating to me, as it was for many family members. While still in school, I would help feed my Grandma every noon hour between my breaks in classes. I was one of the few people that she would respond to. The activity director at the facility saw me visiting and spoke with me about an opening that was available in her department. I never thought I would ever work in a nursing home. I actually rarely entered them until my Grandmother was there, and I am sad to admit that I was almost scared of them. However, visiting my Grandma made me more comfortable and opened me up to the opportunity, and I took the position. I genuinely loved working there as an activity assistant. The position was in the dementia unit which I still have a soft spot for. After working there for two years I had to move to continue pursuing my teaching degree, but the residents and my Grandma were always on my mind and I visited as often as I could.

My schooling continued, but I found I was still drawn to the long-term care field. While I did my student teaching, I decided to take classes to become a certified nursing assistant. I worked in this field for a year and a half. Working as a nurse aide really opened my eyes to a new aspect of the nursing home, compassion. By working with the elderly who had normal signs of aging and some who had dementia-type aging, being a nurse aide helped me to value aspects of my own life that I often take for granted. The fact that I can bathe, dress, groom, and ambulate by myself, that I can think clearly, and that I have the freedom to do what I please. The residents I was helping were disabled mentally or physically, and were not able to do a combination or any of these things for themselves. This is when I genuinely realized the importance in making sure the residents are being provided the highest quality of life possible.

Even in my earliest experience with long term care, I repeatedly found that the activity area was a significant part of the overall success of a nursing facility. I could never leave a resident without making sure they had a magazine, a companion, or were able to participate in a group activity. After completing my degree, I began searching for jobs and saw an activity director opening at Maple Lawn Nursing Home in Fulda, MN. I was thrilled at the opportunity and was blessed to be hired there. I have now worked as an activity director there for the past five years, and love the challenge of working with older adults in a variety of ability levels. I am happy to do something that is fulfilling, meaningful, and makes a difference in people's lives.

By fusing my education background and commitment to providing a compassionate environment for older adults, I have developed my goal as an activities director. My main goal is to encourage involvement between the community and school systems and our facility. Since I have started working at Maple Lawn, I established a 5th Grade group called Buddy Up. The group meets every month with our residents and do different projects, play games, and share stories with the residents. We also have a Psychology class that meets here every other week as well during the school year. The group plays games and visits with the residents. This encourages the development of long-term friendships between the students and the residents. I believe that by having children from a variety of age levels in our facility helps to break down the stereotypes that many young people have about nursing homes. Being immersed in the environment helps them to become more comfortable with the facility and encourages them to interact with the residents. Perhaps in the future, if they have grandparents or parents that need care it won't be such a "scary" place for them. It also helps create positive relationship bonds for our residents as well. Although we have already broken down some barriers at our facility, I feel we have a long way to go. I am encouraged to continue my work in this area.

I truly enjoy the work that I do and have just as much fun as the residents do, although there have been instances where things don't turn out like I had planned. For example, there was a particular resident that voiced that she loved to paint and really wanted to pursue painting. Her room was not very large and so I came up with a plan that would work for her and purchased special art supplies. When I went to set up the project for her she seemed excited. As the weeks went on, I noticed that she never touched it. At first I was disappointed and frustrated, but as I analyzed the situation I found that what she really wanted was someone to visit with her. I changed her plan of care and added one-to-one visits and also encouraged her involvement in more "chit chat" groups. She became a happy, active, and outgoing individual who influenced others to become involved in activities as well. In fact, as time went on she had developed so many friends that we were able to take her off the one-to-one list. Through this experience, she showed me that developing the correct plan of care is of the utmost importance because it can ultimately change a person and improve their quality of life.