

Celebrating A New Lease on LIFE

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LIFE (Living Independently For Elders), an innovative program begun by the School of Nursing at the University of Pennsylvania nearly a decade ago, has a new home with room to grow. The new location can accommodate up to 500 members. LIFE is based on the national PACE model (Program of All-inclusive Care for the Elderly) and is designed to be culturally-specific to the West Philadelphia community it serves. A Council of Elders, composed of members of the program, advises the administrators.

Penn Nursing held the official grand opening last Tuesday at the new facility for the LIFE program which provides nursing home-level day care, including medical, dental, prescription and personal grooming services as well as meals and social activities for more than 300 frail, elderly adults from West Philadelphia, enabling them to live at home. The LIFE staff also makes “house calls” providing in-home oversight to members. The average age of the LIFE member is 78, but they range in age from 55 with disabilities, up to some in their late 90s.

“We are delighted to be able to expand our services to the West Philadelphia community. This is a great example of how nurses contribute to healthcare,” said School of Nursing Dean Afaf I. Meleis. At the celebration, Dean Meleis summarized the history of the program which began as a vision of two Penn Nursing faculty members, Dr. Karen Buhler-Wilkerson and Dr. Mary Naylor, who wanted to translate the research conducted by the faculty about quality of care for the elderly into action. Dean Meleis also credited her predecessor Dean Emerita Norma Lang and former associate dean for academic practices Dr. Lois Evans. The first site opened in 1998 (*Almanac* [October 20, 1998](#)) with a client census of eight members. By 2003, LIFE had 163 members and the Market Street site opened (*Almanac* [November 18, 2003](#)).



Afaf Meleis

“It was this success that resulted in the State asking that we expand even further—asking that we expand enough to accommodate 500 members within two years,” Dean Meleis explained.

President Amy Gutmann proclaimed, “We’ve got LIFE, in more ways than one ... joy, comfort, and dignity to hundreds of our got a wonderful home that will boost the provide the finest in integrated health and of our neighbors.” Dr. Gutmann continued, elderly care program directed by nursing primary care nurses and physicians, physical social workers, recreation therapists, clergy, and drivers.”



Amy Gutmann

the Penn program that brings neighbors. And now, we’ve LIFE program’s capacity to social services to even more “It’s the only all-inclusive faculty, who lead a team of and occupational therapists, home health aides, dieticians,

Three years ago, Penn Nursing partnered with the West Philadelphia community to launch the Healthy in Philadelphia (HIP) initiative. Its mission was to promote healthy lifestyles through screening and education, address health care disparities, and to furnish care for those with chronic illnesses and/or disabilities. The collaboration between Penn and the City was recognized by President Gutmann who presented the first 'Healthy in Philadelphia Award' to Councilwoman Jannie Blackwell for her commitment to the health of West Philadelphia's older adult community, which played a role in the LIFE program's success. Councilwoman Blackwell said, "It's all about quality of life, we are all each other's brothers and sisters and we have to look out for one another."



Jannie Blackwell

Dr. Eileen Sullivan-Marx, associate dean of the School of Nursing, noted that it is fitting that the building is situated between two murals on Chestnut Street, one to the east, depicting Paul Robeson, a civic activist/radical and the other, to the west, a multi-generational mural.

"The LIFE program is the active personification of what nursing is all about and how healthcare can effectively and efficiently operate in this country," Judge Marjorie O. Rendell, the chair of the School of Nursing's Board of Overseers said. She noted that Pennsylvania has the third-highest elderly population in the country with 15.6 percent of the total population 65 and over. She added, "this program is a model for the state and the nation for how quality, equitable care can be provided, and can be provided cost effectively—the LIFE program is the solution." Those of us on the Board, "have been inspired by the talented faculty, dedicated Penn administration, and thoughtful community activists who were instrumental in the development and sustenance of this program over the past 10 years," she said.

The newly renovated 50,000 square-foot facility at 4508 Chestnut Street formerly housed the Mercy Douglass nursing home that was abandoned about eight years ago. Penn, as part of its commitment to its West Philadelphia neighborhood, facilitated the development of the building to meet the needs of the LIFE program which had been in two smaller sites, one at 41st and Woodland and the other at 38th and Market.

The center has an area on the first floor, known as the 'Circle of Care' for those with Alzheimer's or dementia. There, those members receive comprehensive care and are involved in art therapy as a means to communicate and manage their emotions.

The new facility has numerous choices of activities for its members; upstairs, a long hallway known as "Main Street" leads to various rooms for quite activities like reading, arts and crafts, sewing, or reflecting in a chapel, or more lively pursuits like singing in a choir, playing bingo or a game of pool, or those who want to try their hand at the slot machines. They also have art therapy, physical and occupational therapy, if needed. Portraits of dozens of the members line the halls; the photographs were taken by David Idun, the center's financial analyst.



Marjorie Rendell

One member said, "LIFE has saved my life!"



Associate Dean Eileen Sullivan-Marx, Dean Afaf Meleis and the Hon. Marjorie Rendell.



UC Green, with support from a PECO Exelon grant, and the assistance of some 50 volunteers from West Catholic High School, Penn School of Nursing and neighbors, planted 20 street trees on Arbor Day near the new LIFE building site, and was instrumental in landscaping the garden area, above.



Nursing Dean Afaf Meleis at podium, seated left to right, Councilwoman Jannie Blackwell, President Amy Gutmann, Dean of Medicine Arthur Rubenstein, State Rep. James Roebuck.



Delores Quintin, a member of the LIFE Center's Council of Elders, spoke on behalf of the members.



Dean Meleis (center) and Judge Marjorie Rendell (at right) along with other invited guests cut the ribbon at the grand opening for the LIFE Center.



Councilwoman Jannie Blackwell with her Healthy in Philadelphia Award, presented by President Amy Gutmann.



Karen Buhler-Wilkerson and Lois Evans, two of the School of Nursing faculty members who helped establish the LIFE program.



Wayne Pendelton, CEO of the LIFE Center.



UC Green organized volunteers to transform the exterior of the LIFE location.