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## Students help seniors regain social lives

By Jennie Wissner  
February 17, 2005

For senior citizens living in west and southwest Philadelphia, "LIFE" begins around 70.

Since 1998, the program -- known as Living Independently for Elders -- has served Philadelphia by caring for 250 senior citizens, most around 70 years of age. The initiative, which is run by Penn's School of Nursing, allows seniors in need of daytime care to continue to live in their own homes.



[Faatima Qureshi/The Daily Pennsylvanian] The Living Independently for the Elderly program building is located at 38th and Market streets. The program is run by the Nursing School.

"The main goal is to keep them out of nursing homes," said April Martin, a center supervisor.

LIFE membership, paid for by Medicare and Medicaid, provides patients with physical therapy, medical checkups and pharmaceuticals, among other medical necessities. Additionally, the program offers social opportunities that participants find rewarding.

LIFE members Arnita Showell and Emma Harvey said that they look forward to it during the week. Harvey said she gets so excited that she wakes up at 5 a.m.

"Otherwise, I'd be home alone. ... Here, I can talk with people my age and say, 'Remember when?' I can't do that with my kids," Harvey said.

LIFE members also got to celebrate Valentine's Day together this week. In honor of the holiday, members voted for the king, queen, princes and princesses of LIFE. Showell, a member since 2000, was voted a princess.

Other activities include art therapy, sing-alongs and visits by animals from the School of Veterinary Medicine.

Nursing students and staff also participate in the activities. In addition to performing clinical nursing duties, Nursing sophomore Stephanie Mazzaro helped organize quizzes and game shows for members.

Associate Dean for Practice and Community Affairs Eileen Sullivan-Marx once participated in a LIFE fashion show. She and her colleagues exchanged their sober work-wear for more fashionable clothing. One member, a former tailor, even showed off some of the tuxedos he had made.

Nursing sophomore Joanna Hilburn said that she spends a lot of time talking to members.

LIFE "seemed to really give seniors their independence more than just baby-sitting them," Mazzaro said.

In addition to social life, the program also provides practical care that helps keep members out of nursing homes. The staff screens patients for problems when they arrive each morning and tends to them throughout the afternoon as needed.

"Every time I ask for something I need, I get it," Showell said.

According to Executive Director Wayne Pendleton, the program distinguishes itself from other senior-citizen programs by providing transportation between homes and LIFE facilities. Transportation is key because many members lack means of mobility.

Before Harvey joined, her daughter had to take a lot of time off from her job to drive her to doctor's appointments.

Because LIFE provides transportation and medical support, Harvey no longer worries about finding family or friends to drive her around.

Along with constant care for members, the program also promises permanent membership. If patients need temporary hospital or nursing home care, officials will hold their membership and then re-introduce them to the community once they recover.

"That was what I thought was really good. ... Even when they're not their patients, they're always their patients," Mazzaro said.

The program doesn't only help its members; it is also a valuable experience for Nursing students and staff.

Hilburn said that she practiced nursing responsibilities, such as taking blood pressure, checking glucose levels and educating patients while working. She also learned a lot about dementia.

Nursing senior Scott Strahle said that clinical work enhanced his education and allowed him to get to know his patients on a more personal level.

Even Sullivan-Marx said that she appreciates learning from members. She said that she was impressed by one member who talked about owning and operating his own businesses in Philadelphia in the '40s.

Sullivan-Marx said that "there is much to be learned [from members]. They like to remind us all about the importance of fun in our lives, and students learn the about the importance of wisdom."