

## ENRICHING NOW WITH THEN: CONNECTING NURSING HOME RESIDENTS AND STAFF THROUGH ORAL HISTORY

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### Key Findings

- Eighteen of 28 nurses and nurse aides (14, “very much”; 4, “somewhat”) stated that knowing more about the residents’ pasts through the stories helped make their jobs more satisfying and/or helped them to do their jobs better.
- Fourteen of 28 nurses and nurse aides indicated that knowing more about the residents’ pasts through the stories served to improve their perceptions of and/or relations with residents and more closely connected them to the residents.
- Though nearly all residents and staff said they would like to talk more and listen more (respectively) about the residents’ pasts, 9 of 13 residents responded “not at all” when surveyed about how often they talk about their pasts with staff.
- All five key informants from the CCRC’s administrative staff perceived, in addition to their own increased job satisfaction and/or better job performance, a positive effect on the participating residents’ self-esteem and well-being.

### Purpose

This research brief presents and discusses findings on how increased staff knowledge of nursing home residents’ pasts may improve communication and relations between residents and staff (i.e., nurses and nurse aides) and, possibly, improve job satisfaction.

### Background

As we move forward in an era of increased focus on resident-centered, more personalized care in nursing facilities, at a time when annual turnover among nurses and nurse aides is routinely over 50 percent, ways to improve relations between staff and residents and increase job satisfaction among nurses and nurse aides surely become all the more important to explore, document and explain. The therapeutic value of reminiscence for older persons is supported by scores of researchers, but the benefits of such reminiscence when shared with others who care for older persons in nursing facilities have been only minimally observed and recorded (Goldwasser & Auerbach, 1996). In that study, the reminiscence activity did improve the residents’ morale and attitude toward nursing home staff. “Aides who were present while residents were interviewed about the past or present demonstrated significant improvements in general attitudes toward those interviewed and job satisfaction...” (Goldwasser & Auerbach, 1996, p.101). This study builds on previous research by sharing stories about residents’ pasts with direct care staff to examine whether relationships and job satisfaction are changed as a result of knowing more about residents’ pasts.

### Methods

As a preliminary part of this research, oral histories were successfully conducted with 13 residents of a southwestern Ohio continuing retirement care center’s (CCRC) nursing unit. Brief biographies (half-page), along with two-page written versions of the oral histories accompanied by photos, were laminated and posted on the walls outside of residents’ rooms for staff to read at their leisure. Most stories centered on single slices of life (e.g., overnight train ride, sandlot baseball, first job as a teenager), with almost all recounted events occurring in adolescence or early adulthood. After all the stories had been made accessible to staff for more than a month, both residents and staff were interviewed regarding their communications and any effect the stories may have had on their communications and mutual relations. Interview questions were posed in both a three-part Likert-scale format as well as in a qualitative, open-ended manner. The findings represent the responses of the 13 participating residents as well as 18 nurse aides and 10 nurses from the CCRC’s day and evening shifts. Additionally, five administrative staff members served as key informants.

## Discussion

The plain-spoken eloquence of the nurses and nurse aides in this research (accented by that of the key informants) stresses the importance of nursing home staff knowing more about the pasts of their residents and adds testament to the observation of noted reminiscence researcher Faith Gibson (2004, p. xv): “Reminiscence deepens relationships and demonstrates respect for and appreciation of other people and the life each has lived.” Relatively little has been published in this area, and it is hoped that this research will initiate a dialogue with those who may have performed (or be interested in) similar studies. Another, perhaps more important, desired outcome of this research is that more nursing homes will come to understand the value of staff knowing more about the residents’ pasts. As this research indicates, the benefits will extend beyond those doing the reminiscing to the staff members themselves, making nursing homes more personal and humane environments in which to work as well as in which to live.

## Implications

It is emphasized that the methods used to gain and share knowledge about nursing home residents’ pasts are far less significant than the primary result of those methods - i.e., a better understanding of what has made each resident the unique person that he or she is, and a subsequent tighter connection between residents and staff. Nursing home personnel can avail themselves of training offered either free or at low cost through a range of story recording materials offered by StoryCorps ([www.storycorps.org](http://www.storycorps.org)), a nationwide (non-profit) enterprise engaged in recording important events in the lives of ordinary Americans, many of them older persons. On its Web site, *StoryCorps* makes available, free of charge, an instructional companion piece and discussion guide to a collection of its stories found in “Listening Is an Act of Love: A Celebration of American Life From the StoryCorps Project.” Both

logic and research indicate that almost anything done to familiarize staff with residents will be beneficial. As one aide in this study put the byproducts of her increased knowledge of residents’ pasts so poignantly: “It reminds me that all these people have been through so much. That he or she is not just an old person. It helps remind me to always respect them. It makes them more human.”

### Participant Observations

*“Well, I like to talk about my childhood, if people will listen. Everybody likes to talk about themselves, don’t they? And I like to think about the past. I had an interesting childhood; came from a big family. It’s a way of making sure that all that stays close to me; that the people from those times stay close to my heart.”* – Resident

*“It helps when you’re working with them (the residents) to relate the past. I like just knowing more about them. Gives me things to talk about with them. It helps in my job. It reminds me that all these people have been through so much. That he or she is not just an old person. It helps remind me to always respect them. It makes them more human.”* - Nurse Aide

*“It makes you understand what makes them (the residents) the way they are. Knowing more about them makes me think of them more like a family member, like this could be my grandma. It makes you more tolerant. More compassionate.”* - Nurse

## References

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