

Motivation, Momentum and Many Hugs at Assisted Living Well

The Editor Returns

By Warren Kahle

With the July 1, 2007 publication of the first issue of "Momentum", the newsletter of Assisted Living Well, came a huge sigh of relief. Carl Balcerak, the editor and sole staff writer (so far) had been working on the publication since March. He had run into many difficulties, including needing to borrow a laptop computer that he had no idea how to use and learning the basics of typing documents, saving his work, and editing text. Carl had come from an era when mechanical typewriters were used. A significant problem pertained to the size of keyboard and spacing of the keys; they were not arranged comfortably for his arthritic fingers.

Such "problems" notwithstanding, Carl had some time-tested ideas as to how he would approach producing the newsletter and how the page layout should look. He had been and editor for Catholic newspapers in Pennsylvania and Texas and a photographer and journalist for a Catholic missionary organization in Washington D.C. Page mock-ups are not new to him, but having to draw his own layout sheets (to scale) in order to see how articles, photos, drawings, headings, and banners would look on a computer and in the finished laser printed document was more than an inconvenience. Having dealt with changing printing methods throughout his career, he used a mock-up method that he knew would make his intentions clear to everyone involved.

Carl was the second resident of Assisted Living Well, having moved in at the beginning of January 2007. Like many people in his situation -- leaving his home and moving to an assisted living environment -- Carl was reticent, but understood that he needed day-to-day help. He had no family members who could fill this need. Some of the staff probably found him demanding and difficult to satisfy. Despite the staff's success in getting Carl to eat well, feel physically better, and take his medications on schedule, Carl was concerned about his financial ability to stay at Assisted Living Well in the long term. After two months Carl decided to try another assisted living facility, but returned to Assisted Living Well in just two weeks, having found the food, staff, and physical comforts

of Assisted Living Well much superior. Also, Living Well's sizeable rooms with private bathrooms that are properly designed for a person who gets around in a wheelchair became a huge factor in his decision to return. The staff, ownership, and residents cheerfully welcomed Carl back with a cake, balloons, and hugs. The short-term trip had quickly convinced him that this was a much better place to live. Inasmuch as he had known all the staff members by their first names and understood their roles at Living Well before his departure, the return was quite easy.

Since mid-March Carl has been interviewing residents, staff, and "outsiders" following a trail of information to determine how Assisted Living Well was created, who comprised the team responsible for it for its unique approach, and why its neighborhood location adjacent to a children's equestrian center was chosen, among other things. Getting about in a wheelchair did not seem to hamper his investigation and his note taking. He did personal or phone interviews with most everyone involved in the creation of Assisted Living Well, key members of the staff, and even the owners of the equestrian center behind the facility. He asked that the horses be encouraged to run for a particular photo he had in mind to accompany an article about Agnes, the first resident of Assisted Living Well and a horse enthusiast.

"Momentum" was also the name of a newsletter that Carl published years ago. The title seems to fit for Assisted Living Well, and it also seems to describe, in one word, Carl himself. Indeed, Carl now has some momentum...even at the age of 86. Just nine months ago, in September 2006, a doctor who had been treating Carl at Anne Arundel Medical Center told me in confidence that Carl had one to two days to live. Accordingly, I promptly began making funeral arrangements. I have found his comeback absolutely remarkable. A renaissance, of sorts, due in part to the efforts of the staff and ownership of Assisted Living Well and to Carl's circle of friends who regularly keep in touch with him and, together, helped Carl re-discover his passion for life and reemerge as "The Editor".

Warren Kahle, an Annapolis resident, has been a friend of Carl Balcerak for about 12 years. Both share an interest in photography.

MOMENTUM

Momentum is published whenever by Assisted Living Well, 271 W. Pasadena Road, Millersville, MD 21108 July, 2007, Vol. 1, No. 1

An Affair of Love

And they're off...Anteater takes the lead, followed by Whippet and Burma Dog...At the quarter pole it's Lancelot...At the half it's Burma Dog...and breaking from the outside in the stretch it's...

...Agnes, Agnes Nicholson, to whom the sound of a race track announcer's voice is still sweet music.

Agnes, who on Dec. 1, 2006, became the Living Well's first resident, comes from "a horse-loving family." She said: "I love horses."

Agnes helped care for horses owned by her uncle and grandfather. "Going to the track was a family affair," said her daughter, Cindy, who with her daughter, Terry, visits Agnes frequently.

Agnes's other daughter, Pam, who lives in Charleston, WV, also visits. And Charleston is the track that was most frequently patronized by Agnes and company.

Agnes even had a favorite jockey: Travis Dunkelberry (correct). Latest reports say that he is still on track at Charleston.

Persons meeting Agnes for the first time may get the wrong impression of her because her voice at times sounds like a truck crunching over gravel: "Who asked you?" "What do you know about it?"

But her occasional harshness is submerged by her pleasant "How ya doin'?" and her rollicking sense of humor: "Who stole my butter?"

Agnes considers herself lucky to be living in a place from which she can see horses running at Kilmarnock, the neighboring equestrian riding stable. And she can watch her favorite movie, the most recent "Seabiscuit", on the wide TV screen in the Well's parlor. She estimates that she has seen the movie, about perhaps "the winningest" colt in U.S. history, at least 200 times.

But Agnes does not exist in a here-and-now world only. From time-to-time you can "catch" her, around bedtime,

sitting in the large dining room, her hand on her cheek, staring into the darkness.

Perhaps she is thinking: Wouldn't it be heavenly to be running alongside a born-again Seabiscuit into a glorious sunset?+



Agnes and friend.

COMPOSITE BY W. KAHLE

Rekindling the Spark



The "Momentum" banner states that the newsletter is published whenever. The Assisted Living Well Family is looking forward to the next edition "whenever" Carl, the Editor, tells us it's ready.

The staff, ownership and Resident Guests of Assisted Living Well were so impressed that this 86 year-old, wheelchair bound man performed and orchestrated every aspect of the reporting, writing, production and circulation that we felt compelled to share it with a larger audience. We share this in the hope that at least one frustrated senior or family member understands that with the proper compassionate and professional environment, seniors that most people have given up on, or those who have even given up on themselves, can become "Super Stars".

Living Well on...

lived here until 1961. They farmed, raised horses and cattle and other animals, and ran Boyer's General Store from 1948 to 1955."

He said that when the old house burned down in 1942 the Boyers lived for a few years in a home 24 x 24 feet that eventually became the store. When the Boyers thought the store was not generating enough business they had a mule team drag it to where the 271 building location is today. Before that happened, the old building became the Hitching Post bar, and later it was owned by an inventor who sold it to the LLC in 2004.

All of the Boyer children, except Bryant, had sold their land by 1961. That year, Bryant bought land from his father where the corral and horse riding stable, renamed Kilmarnock Farm, now stand.

During his tenure, Bryant and his wife, Nancy, who died in 1988, raised animals other than horses.

"There was a time," Bryant said, "When I had 39 mastiffs and 19 cats."

By cats, Bryant meant lions, tigers, and leopards. They were wounded cats he got from the US Department of Agriculture.

Among them was one called Trina, which they kept as a pet.

"One day," Bryant said, "a salesman tried to sell me a home security system over the phone. I told him that if he got by my security system, I would buy his. So one day he came driving up to my house, and as he was getting

out of his car two of my mastiffs ran out to greet him. He could see by their wagging tails that they were friendly. But when he saw me come out the front door with Trina behind me, he quickly got into his car and drove away."

Horse Sense

Bryant said that the Boyers have been giving horseback riding and jumping lessons for 45 years. Bryant's oldest daughter, Dawn, was a jockey, and his other daughter, Holly, teaches riding and jumping at the Kilmarnock Farm, which is adjacent to Assisted Living Well. Bryant sold the stable in 2006 to Dan Dickerson.

Bryant owns a farm, Windy Bray, in Delaware and is now married to Melba, who was a close friend of Nancy.

Lions Roaring

Paul Poteet, who has lived in the West Pasadena Road area since he was three, said he and other residents recall the sound of the lions roaring from the Boyer farm.

It was Poteet, who still sells fruit from a stand on West Pasadena Road, who recommended Sandy Marshall, now director of nursing, to Craig Lussi when he stopped at Poteet's stand to chat.

Sandy has 30 years of experience in nursing. She now supervises a staff of 24 persons, full and part-time. Craig hired her sight unseen in May, 2005 based on her experience. She didn't meet him until December, 2006.

In hiring Sandy, Craig was acting in line with advice given

...Land Rich in History



Craig Lussi

Holly Boyer

to him by William Dorrill, who has jurisdiction over all programs for assisted living in Maryland. Craig said Dorrill told him that the main problems were inexperienced personnel, high employee turnover and unappetizing meals.

Craig hired another local girl, Kate Krauss, as director of marketing. She has a degree in merchandising from the University of Maryland.

Kate was hired in November, 2006. Craig refers to her as "Kate of all trades" because she handles so many duties.

She presents the merits of Assisted Living Well to patients in hospitals, rehab facilities and geriatric centers.

Teamwork

Heeding advice given, Craig hired a food gourmet chef for the Living Well kitchen, Chris Traynor.

He had served for three years as chef at the Inn at Perry Cabin in St. Michaels, MD, and for nine years at the Charleston, SC, Place Hotel.

There are four assistant chefs and three kitchen helpers.

Last, but certainly not least, on the Living Well team is his wife, Jeannette. She is responsible, too, for obtaining, by accident,

by accident, the consulting services of Dr. Miles Varn, who for 14 years worked at Inova Fairfax Hospital.

On another sunny day, this time in June, 2000, Jeannette, a triathlon "Ironman", was whipping along at 25 mph on her racing bike on Gibson Island when a Labrador darted into her path causing her to fall into a rock culvert and hit a tree. She suffered a severe concussion and multiple bruises. Her safety helmet was crushed, but she credits it with saving her life.

Dr. Varn, was called by the woman who caused the accident by letting her dog off its leash. He quickly called an ambulance that took her to the Baltimore Washington Hospital.

Thus began a Varn-Lussi friendship that resulted in Dr. Varn's being a consultant to Assisted Living Well during the development phase. Dr. Varn lives in a house on a separate property bought in 2005. The 265 building is similar to the 271 building and home to Alzheimer's patients and others with memory retention problems.

Jeannette is the first to admit that initially she had less than an avid interest in assisted living. "I never thought I'd get into this," she said, "but now I feel very rewarded visiting the residents and learning about their problems and successes. I have a new-found respect for the elderly."

Jeannette's interest was rekindled, too, when she got the chance to decorate the inside of the homes. Some persons may think that the interior paintings



Bryant Boyer and Trina (circa 1958), and furnishings are too modern, but there is no doubt about the simplicity of the décor. There is no clutter.

Signs of Success

Now that Assisted Living Well has passed its rookie phase, how does it measure up to Craig Lussi's ideal?

"My judgment depends directly on feedback from residents and their families," Lussi said. "I tried to follow the advice of specialists in the field of senior care, and I am gratified with the results. One sign of our success is that a resident who left us returned within three weeks."

Lussi added: "I think that our program here may very well be a model for improving senior care in Maryland and adding more compassion to the industry."

The lands once belonging to Frank and Virginia Boyer have all been sold, the area has adjusted to a more sedate form of life, and no longer does the roar of a lion break the silence of an evening.

But the horses in the adjoining Kilmarnock Farm still make a beautiful sight when they run and gambol on the grass.+

Please come visit and experience the difference for yourself.

Call us for a tour today!

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Compassion Begins at Our Front Door