

How miniature horses enhanced

life and wellness at Kensington Village



Miniature horses corralled on campus enthralled residents at this ‘age-in-place’ community, as well as their families and friends

“For recreation therapists, the prospect of implementing a large-scale and innovative program is like winning the lottery,” says Daniel Bisson, recreation manager of an active retirement community in Alberta, Canada. “It’s a singular event,” he continues, “but one with the potential to make a huge impact.”

In 2010, Bisson and his colleagues at Shepherd’s Care Kensington Village had the opportunity to provide just that kind of program when they brought miniature horses to the campus for the summer. The goal, he explains, was to enhance the wellness of the community’s 600-plus

residents through interaction with these animals.

Located on 17 acres in Edmonton, Alberta’s capital city, Kensington Village operates under the umbrella of Shepherd’s Care Foundation, a nonprofit charitable organization sponsored by three Pentecostal churches. The “age-in-place” community serves older adults with low-to-moderate incomes across the levels of care. Accommodation includes independent living apartments, condominiums, lodge units, designated assisted living, enhanced designated assisted living and continuing care.

Shepherd’s Care Foundation, according to its website, exists to “celebrate life in a caring Christian environment.”

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Large numbers of Kensington Village residents came outdoors last summer to interact with the miniature horses. ‘Individuals could brush, pet and talk to the horses, as well as feed them treats,’ says the community’s Daniel Bisson

Established in 1970, Shepherd’s Care has grown over time to encompass five communities in Edmonton and nearby Barrhead (with another under construction), as well as managed sites and home care programs. Values espoused by the foundation refer to dignity, equality, respect and quality care, among other things. As defined by Shepherd’s Care, “Quality care is holistic, providing for spiritual, physical, emotional and social needs in a loving Christian environment.”

Knowing that the presence of animals in continuing care can support resident wellness,¹ the Kensington Village recreation department aimed to introduce miniature horses to the campus. The process of developing and implementing the program took more than a year. But

in the end, Bisson observes, “it was a tremendous success.”

To learn more, the *Journal on Active Aging*[®] recently asked Bisson to discuss what was involved in providing the miniature horses program and what impact this initiative had on the community.

JAA: *What was the catalyst for the miniature horses program at Kensington Village?*

DB: The recreation department is always on the lookout for new and innovative ideas to enhance the experience of living at Kensington Village. Last year, we decided to bring in miniature horses—not for occasional visits, but as semipermanent residents in our large outdoor courtyard. Word spread quickly (accompanied

by countless variations of “We are getting what?”), and for the next few months it was the number one topic of discussion.

A multitude of concerns arose before the horses had even arrived. We frequently heard such questions as:

- “Who is going to feed them?”
- “What about the smell?”
- “Who is going to pay for this?”

To win over the skeptics, we needed to do our homework.

After reviewing current literature we found that all the studies came to the same overall conclusion: The presence

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While at Kensington Village, the miniature horses lived in a specially constructed pen in the large outdoor courtyard, complete with a small barn shed purchased from a Hutterite colony

of animals provides an overwhelming benefit to older adults. Specifically, the presence of pets in continuing care can enhance resident wellness by increasing socialization and decreasing loneliness.¹ Recreation therapy is able to use animals in various interventions to improve the physical, cognitive, emotional and social functions in those they serve.

Because of the varied population at Kensington Village, we planned to use the horses in an animal-assisted activities (AAA) capacity. The Delta Society, which is dedicated to improving human health through therapy and service animals, describes AAA/pet visitation as “basically the casual ‘meet and greet’ activities that involve pets visiting people.” Having numerous social, recreational, motivational, educational and therapeutic benefits, AAA range from individuals bringing the family pet to visit, to trained volunteers and paraprofessionals with certified therapy animals who visit hospitals, long-term care residences, hospices, residential treatment centers, group homes, community living centers, and schools.² We felt

that by focusing on AAA at Kensington Village, we would not miss any of the residents interested in interacting with the animals.

JAA: *Practically speaking, how did you and your colleagues develop the program? What was involved?*

DB: We began by approaching Terry and Peter Holt, who own and operate Hollyhock Meadow miniature horse farm. The Holts have been breeding and showing miniatures horses since 1988 and belong to the Western Canadian Miniature Horse Club. A primary focus for Hollyhock Meadow is visiting older-adult communities and residences and/or hosting groups at the farm. In fact, Terry and Peter have visited more than 30 different care facilities with their four-legged friends over the years, including Kensington Village. The Holts welcomed our venture and the prospect of trying something they had never done before: leaving selected horses at a seniors’ residence for several weeks at a time.

We applied to the City of Edmonton Planning Department for a permit allowing us to keep the horses on-site. Obtaining that permit, however, proved to be the part of the development process that took the longest and provided us with our most anxious moments. Eventually, the city granted us a temporary Prohibited Animal Permit for the summer.

Uncertainty resolved, we could now begin putting infrastructure in place. We hired a contractor to build a pen in the courtyard measuring 48 ft. x 34 ft. to hold the horses. Next, we needed to find a barn. We contacted the nearest Hutterite colony and purchased a 6 ft. x 8 ft. barn shed, which we painted red in preparation for receiving the Holts’ animals.

With the red tape behind us, permission, permits and infrastructure complete, our equine adventure could begin.

JAA: *What happened with the horses on campus?*

DB: The miniature horses arrived on June 1, 2010, visiting on a rotation of two weeks on and two weeks off campus until their last day on September 24. This gave them continued access to a larger area for their exercise needs and ensured their ongoing interaction with the original herd at Hollyhock Meadow.

Recreation staff and the community chaplain were responsible for overseeing the program at Kensington Village, so all of us who were involved went to a training session at the Holts’ farm prior to the horses arriving. This same group maintained and fed the horses when they were on campus.

Over the next months, programming included bringing residents outdoors to interact with the horses in the courtyard, as well as taking the horses indoors to

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visit those who were unable to walk. Individuals could brush, pet and talk to the horses, as well as feed them treats. The animals were also featured in special events in the courtyard.

The initial skepticism about the miniature horses turned into excitement once they were actually with us and then to profound disappointment when they left. They were a hit! And not only with the people who live at Kensington Village, but with their families and friends also.

JAA: *What kind of impact did the program have?*

DB: Our initial goal was to increase socialization and decrease loneliness in residents. We discovered that having the miniature horses provided more benefits than originally anticipated. A survey, distributed to 300 residents at the end of the summer program, helped us to understand the overall impact on our population.

An overwhelming number (93%) of respondents enjoyed having the miniature horses at our center. The calming effect of watching animals, the opportunity to socialize with others, and the novel aspect of having horses in the middle of the city enticed large numbers out to see them. When asked if they had an opportunity to visit the horses, 94% said yes—although they gave many different ways of visiting them. Here is a sampling of responses:

- “Almost every day I would watch the horses from the fourth floor window.”
- “I have very severe allergies and could not pet the horses or be too close to them; however, I enjoyed them from a distance.”
- “I enjoyed the horses and taking people in wheelchairs down to see them.”
- “I walked through the courtyard daily so I could see them while they were here. I chose to walk right up close to the pen to see what they were doing.”

- “I went out several times in the evenings for a walk and stopped to see them. I found it got me out of my suite a lot more.”

According to the Center for Health Systems and Design at Texas A&M University, “Having access to nature and the outdoors has long been considered therapeutic for [older adults] in long-term care settings. Research is beginning to confirm that spending time outdoors may improve sleeping patterns, reduce pain, decrease urinary incontinence and verbal agitation, speed up recovery from disability and even increase longevity.”³

Our survey discovered that 62% of respondents said their main reason for going outside was to visit the horses, while 63% also said they made a point of seeing the animals more than once during their time in the courtyard. The residents did not come alone, however. Family visitation also increased. Fully 77% of the survey respondents said they had specifically invited someone to visit while the horses were on campus. Most invited their children and grandchildren.

For the eight weeks the horses were at Kensington Village, our courtyard was used like no other time in the past. It was incredible to see. The outdoors seemed to come to life because of our miniature equine visitors.


JAA: *What can you tell us about indoor visits with the miniature horses?*

DB: Although the most popular place to spend time with the horses was outdoors (90%), some individuals in care were not able to get outside. For that reason, we set up weekly visits indoors. There were hundreds of visits over the summer with residents in long-term care, designated assisted living, and enhanced designated assisted living.

For some of our population, these indoor visits were unpopular. Wet cleanups were

sometimes necessary—and these occasional accidents did not go unnoticed. Fortunately, horse droppings are quite easy to deal with. And we always carried around a bucket with gloves, bags, scoopers, brush and disinfectant to clean up the mess. Interestingly, too, the public health inspector who heard about our horses through a radio interview came for a visit and had no concerns about the horses being inside.

JAA: *How would you sum up this program experience for readers?*

DB: We successfully accomplished what we set out to do, and in so doing, changed the face of our center for a summer. In the end, the survey results reflected how residents and families enjoyed having the horses at Kensington Village, as well as the benefits that came with them. The program was so well-received, in fact, that the miniature horses are back on campus. We’re looking forward to another summer with our four-legged friends. 

The Journal on Active Aging thanks Daniel Bisson of Shepherd’s Care Kensington Village for his help with this article. For more information about Shepherd’s Care Foundation and Kensington Village, visit www.shepherdscares.org.

References

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Images courtesy of Shepherd’s Care Kensington Village