Care homes get creative - and residents have a ball

Arts activities that engage the intellect and passions of older people can improve their quality of life

Care home residents are acting out The Great Gatsby. Well, they’re acting out the making of the movie: there are actors, a director, camera operator and some of the staff are extras.

They have been working on this project for the whole week and they’re having a ball. There have been laughter and smiles, and families have been impressed by the joy, energy and difference in interactions with staff.

This is what life can be like in a care home with the help of the arts provider Ladder to the Moon. It can change the atmosphere, enable staff to see residents’ capacity and personality, and build bridges between residents, staff and families.

It can also support staff engagement, confidence and leadership, which are vital to achieving excellence in care.

Medical model

Support for older people often tends towards the medical model and the practical elements of daily life, such as being fed, dressed, given medication and put to bed. Traditional charity services focus on befriending, lunch clubs and chat.

Activity providers in care homes struggle to fill a schedule of activities week by week. If you looked at a care plan for a young disabled person and compared it with the plan for an older person, you would find hugely different expectations for learning, getting out and about, social activities and friendship. This is because our expectations for later life are depressingly low.

Yet older people deserve a life that engages their energies, intellect and passions, from faith, leisure, movement and fitness to education, learning and the arts.

Participating in arts activities is absorbing and joyful, it gives voice to individuals, changes dynamics and builds friendships. It can transform how staff see residents, from lists of conditions and medication to individuals with personalities, experiences and souls.

Creative projects

That’s why over the past 5 years the Baring Foundation has funded a huge range of creative projects with older people in the community and in care homes.

We have supported concert parties, story-telling, comedy, artists in residence, visual and digital arts, animation and film, music, movement and dance. We have an aspiration to put a choir in every care home. We have also worked with funders such as the Arts Councils in all four nations, and partnered with the Nominet Trust in a new digital arts programme.

These projects don’t just fill the time, they enhance self-esteem and confidence, build community and contact, and improve mental and physical well-being.

Movement and music

There are many valid reasons why we cannot afford to waste the talents of older people. Because the arts are good for the soul and the brain.

But also because without surprise, joy, playfulness, absorption and reflection; without moments of sound and then of quiet; without movement and music, or the touch of a hand or the crafting of a picture or piece of clay in our hands, we simply aren’t living.

I hope that the next time you look for a care home for a beloved relative you expect a creative programme - not just activities. And that every care home manager and inspector sees such programmes as a fundamental feature of excellence in care.

Age of Creativity present an array of creative offerings for care homes. Go to www.ageofcreativity.co.uk