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Innovation of the Year

Connecting seniors to the virtual world of social media pays off in spades at Sienna Senior Living

It's a brave new online world for residents across Sienna Senior Living's network of long-term care and retirement homes. In 2014, the long-term care provider linked up with the Cyber-Seniors organization to help seniors make the most of today's online communication tools.

The program, also called Cyber-Seniors, was created to supply Sienna residents with the skills and confidence needed to use social media tools like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and email. It does so by pairing them with tech-savvy high-school volunteers, who in turn are given the opportunity to make a difference within the community and foster their communication and life skills. The program has met with tremendous success, and in 2015 it was recognized with an OLTCA Innovation of the Year Award.

"(Cyber-Seniors) honours residents' desire for independence with unlimited access to explore topics of interest, learn new skills and be entertained," says Jill Gibson, Recreation and Leisure Consultant with Sienna Senior Living. "It's about helping residents to live life fully every day. With family members and friends living all around the world, it removes physical barriers to communication and allows residents to stay connected with friends and family."

Sienna is Cyber-Seniors' national senior care partner. The program was inspired by Macaulee and Kascha Cassaday's Cyber-Seniors

documentary, which follows the two high-school students as they teach their own grandparents how to navigate the Internet and acquire online skills. Following the documentary, Macaulee and Kascha wrote an official Cyber-Seniors training manual and recruited other students to mentor seniors in nearby retirement homes and have their own journeys archived on a dedicated YouTube channel.

The documentary also challenged the long-term care community to adopt similar programs within their homes and facilities. Sienna answered that call by reaching out to Cyber-Seniors to fund a screening of the documentary in Toronto and develop a program for its residents.

To help, Sienna enlisted students at the University of Toronto Health Sciences Faculty to assist in determining how the Cyber-Seniors program could be adapted for residents across all of the organization's houses and divisions. The university students spent eight weeks developing, testing and fine-tuning the program in close collaboration with Sienna's care communities. A resource manual was then created to guide Sienna in launching the program across all of its 57 residences and communities.

Wide appeal

At first, residents were reluctant to embrace the Cyber-Seniors program. Their attitudes were quick to change, however, when the student volunteers demonstrated how easy and safe it

was to use online communication tools to reach out to loved ones. The program has since drawn a large number of senior students and, as a side benefit, created genuine friendships between the seniors and high-school volunteers.

"Many true friendships have been established between the youth and older adults participating in the program," says Gibson. "Many youth have told us it is a meaningful volunteer placement experience, and once the program is completed, the youth are reaching out to volunteer in an ongoing capacity within the care communities. In fact, four out of 11 volunteers at one community reported they would explore careers in gerontology as a direct result of their Cyber-Seniors experience."

Awakening communities to the positive possibilities of life's next chapters has always been part of Sienna's vision. Now, thanks to Cyber-Seniors, that includes helping residents to bridge digital and generational divides.

Speaking on the recognition the program has received, Gibson says, "We are so proud and honoured to be recognized, and feel fortunate to be included alongside so many other recipients and nominees committed to quality and innovation in long-term care. We are excited to see this program continue to grow and blossom across the organization." 