

DANCING THROUGH THE PANDEMIC

Sometimes it's the simple ideas that turn into the best ones. In May, when our staff were attempting to come up with new ideas to keep everyone busy and happy during quarantine, the idea of throwing an outdoor block party was brought up. It's a simple concept: put out two large speakers, hook up a phone and play some great music. This small, simple idea has turned into one of the best ways to spend Friday afternoons. Staff and residents are encouraged to dance in front of their homes while the speakers blast everything from AC/DC to George Strait to the Spice Girls. Of course, song requests are encouraged throughout the hour long party with the most requested song typically being Footloose by Kenny Loggins.

Since May there have been three epic block parties and three outdoor concerts. One of the homes has three talented staff who set up their instruments and play song covers. The guys covered a wide variety of music and took requests from the audience. With the cold weather approaching, the block parties and outdoor concerts may be over until spring but we know our wonderful staff will find ways to keep everyone dancing!



VILLAGE NORTHWEST UNLIMITED // FALL 2020

VILLAGE VOICE



GROWING JOY

Gardens grow more than just vegetables.

VNU's resident green thumb, Emily Andringa, decided to bring the excitement of gardening into one of the waiver homes last March. She started by having residents slice a tomato, and put the slices into a pot. Then, they tended to the tomato plants until they were big enough to be planted in one of three garden plots in the Sheldon Community Garden. The balance of the plots were then filled with sunflowers, pumpkins, zucchini, beans, cucumbers, peppers and more tomato plants.

All told, three different waiver homes were in charge of the gardens' care. In fact, most mornings if you drove by the garden, you would see residents and their staff diligently watering the plants, and harvesting what was ready to be eaten. Eventually, the garden began producing more vegetables than the three homes could eat. Extra vegetables were dispersed throughout the other 13 VNU waiver homes. So many vegetables were grown they even had the opportunity to donate them to Upper Des Moines Opportunity in Primghar, IA.

Emily commented on a highlight of the project. "Watching the pumpkins grow and develop was of special interest to our consumers. There were lots of smiles while helping out in the garden and even more when the scarecrow was placed in the garden."

Clearly the vegetable garden provided more than just the actual vegetables. The residents got a real sense of pride and joy from watching something they created and care for grow into something everyone could enjoy.



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TIME IS ON OUR SIDE

VNU staff members' service spans decades.

In 2020, you would be hard pressed to see employees who have been with the same company for 20 or more years. But what if we told you we didn't have a few, but dozens. That is absolutely the case at VNU. Currently, VNU has 77 staff members who have dedicated 20 or more years to VNU with 10 of those staff having been at VNU for 40 or more years. That statistic is phenomenal and something both VNU and the employees are proud of. For decades, many of our staff and residents have "grown up" and experienced life together.

Brian Robyn, Director of Human Resources, stated, "It is inspiring and humbling at the same time to know that VNU has so many team members who have dedicated more than 20 years of their life to the individuals served at the VNU. In today's work environment, this is unprecedented. It is a reflection of these people's belief in the mission, vision and values of VNU. We would not be the organization we are without these staff members. They have made many connections, built community and followed their calling at VNU. We are very grateful for these employees."

Beyond the numbers, staff retention is a critical piece of how VNU fulfills its mission to provide Purpose, Privacy and Dignity to all People. Staff members who can work with the same residents for years or decades, develop a special bond and friendship that can be challenging to replicate. Just like you would expect, relationships take time. These relationships are absolutely critical to the high expectations and standards VNU has come to be known for, as we love and serve adults with disabilities.

"The fact that we have so many long-term employees at VNU says a couple of things to me. One, Village staff develop deep and meaningful relationships with their fellow staff members and our residents and they often feel that the Village is an extension of their own family. They have a Village family. Two, the Village has built and continues to build a culture in which we as an organization openly show and express our gratitude for our staff. The Village has a reputation for being a company that places great importance on showing our staff that we appreciate and value them. People want to know that they are appreciated and valued and that they are respected and the Village does an excellent job of letting our staff know this." said Barry Whitsell, President & CEO.



Kaitlin Van Dyke, 6 Years of Service
Sara Wolthuizen, 21 Years of Service

Sometimes, you really can go home again. In fact, VNU has seen several staff who have left to pursue other endeavors, only to inevitably make a return to VNU. Cheri Brunsting, staff member of a combined 13 years, said, "VNU has always felt like home to me. Being able to return has felt so natural – it's where I belong. Even with all the challenges the COVID world has thrown at us – there is a comfort in coming to work every day. When you love what you do, who you are with and what your company stands for; it's really not work. It's a life, a really good life."



Lori Fischer
32 Years of Service

Daphne Bremer
23 Years of Service



Julie Lemcke, 41 Years of Service

FAIR SEASON

The Clay County Fair is an event well attended by VNU clients, but this year with the event being cancelled we had to put our own "fair" together for our clients. Three days of fair food, carnival games and butter sculpting was put together by our staff. Of course, the highlight of the events was the food. Cotton candy, mini donuts and snow cones were served to everyone with the mini donuts being the star of the show. We are thankful our staff were willing to help us bring a little bit of the fair to our campus!



GIVING TUESDAY 2020

December 1st, 2020 is Giving Tuesday. It's a day that emphasizes opportunities to give back to communities and causes in ways that allow for social connection and kindness. We all have gifts to give and with social media, online giving, delivery, mail and phones, there are limitless ways to use your generosity to support others. VNU plans to provide opportunities for our clients and staff to give back to our community. For ways to get involved with VNU on Giving Tuesday go to www.villagenorthwest.org/givingtuesday.



IACP AWARD WINNER

"Never believe that a few caring people can't change the world. For, indeed, that's all who ever have."

Mag Vander Wilt received the 2020 Frontline Supervisor Community Builder Award. The award was given by the Iowa Association of Community Providers on Thursday, August 27. The IACP supports Iowa community providers so they can fully support lowans in need of mental health and disability services. Mag has worked for VNU for over 30 years. Today, Mag serves as the Community Program Director, supervising VNU's Community Day Habilitation Program. The program Mag developed with her team has over 400 different curriculum topics that focus on community integration. Many of these curriculums provide VNU clients with the opportunities to get "inside" their community while getting "outside" of the classroom. Her coworkers stated, "Mag believes with all her heart that the individuals served by VNU deserve to experience all the best things in life. She is passionate, hardworking, dedicated and relentless in her pursuit of what is right for individuals with disabilities."

