

A time to celebrate | Local retirement communities enjoy the spirit of the season

Beth O'Grady already knows what she'll wear for the big holiday party at Smith Village, a retirement community on Chicago's South Side. She saves the special item of clothing just for the occasion, a lavish annual dinner for the residents hosted by the community's board of trustees.

The event includes cocktails, hors d'oeuvres, a carving station and colorful Christmas decorations. The elegant dinner once featured a chimney ice sculpture filled with shrimp. "The party is fabulous," says O'Grady, who has lived along with her husband at Smith Village for seven years. "That's when I bring out my velvet top."

Retirement communities and their residents go all out to celebrate during the holidays. Activity calendars during December are crammed with special events. School children and music groups give concerts. Families are invited for festive meals. Residents decorate cookies and Christmas trees. Wreath-making is a favorite. Special ceremonies and services commemorate different religious traditions.

The holidays highlight the sense of community sought by many people who move to a senior living facility or campus. They want to live in a place with people who share their customs and values.

Many communities tailor holiday activities to the specific needs and personal backgrounds of the residents.

Covenant Living at the Holmstad, a retirement community in Batavia, has roots in the Swedish population. Each Christmas the community celebrates Saint Lucia's Day, a festival of lights observed in the Nordic countries.

A team member at the Holmstad dresses in white, wearing a lighted wreath on her head. She visits residents throughout the campus. A smorgasbord meal completes the celebration.

Memories with meaning

Terra Vista is a memory care community in Oakbrook Terrace. Special care is taken to customize celebrations for those with memory loss and their family members at a time of year that can be especially stressful.

Since those with memory loss can be overwhelmed by big gatherings at a relative's home, families are invited to gather at Terra Vista with their loved ones prior to the holidays for a special meal. "Families will have time to celebrate together," says Mark Davis, director of business development at Terra Vista.

The 15,000-square-foot inner courtyard at Terra Vista is transformed into a winter wonderland with white lights. The



Smith Crossing in Orland Park sparkles with the spirit of the season with festive holiday decorations and celebrations.



From left: Mercy Circle residents Maria Bosch and Sister Cathleen Cahill prepare for Christmas by lighting the Advent wreath.



A resident's ornament of the Sears Tower (now Willis Tower) is on Terra Vista's memory tree.

centerpiece is a large fresh pine tree on a platform that everyone can see. Big picture windows in the common areas and the residents' apartments look out on the inner courtyard. Residents can also safely enjoy a stroll through the secured courtyard featuring wide circular pathways, appropriate for those with memory loss.

This year, family members are being asked to bring in a tree ornament that

tells a story about their loved one. It could be a nostalgic ornament that the resident cherished. Or it could be an ornament that relates to the resident's life. For example, a resident who helped build the Sears Tower (now Willis Tower) will have an ornament of the building. Former Terra Vista residents who have passed away will be represented on the tree by a dove ornament.

Families are invited to help the resident hang their special ornament on the tree. "It's a conversation starter," says Natalie McFarland, executive director at Terra Vista. Team members at the community can also stop with residents at the tree and ask about their ornament.

At Tamarisk NorthShore, an independent living community in Deerfield, residents enjoy multiple celebrations. They gather to light candles on the menorah to observe the eight days of Hanukkah (Dec. 18-26) and enjoy music from a traditional klezmer band.

Tamarisk, which is managed by CJE SeniorLife, also displays a Christmas tree and decorations. Chinese food and movie watching are planned on Christmas, a Jewish American tradition. Members of the Lyric Opera of Chicago who recently performed in "Fiddler on the Roof" are slated to sing at Tamarisk in December.

Reflect and rejoice

December is packed with celebrations at Mercy Circle, a retirement community on Chicago's Southwest Side. Sponsored by the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, the community is open to those of all faiths. Holiday activities include caroling, tree decorating, seasonal crafts, and entertainment by the Heavenly Harps, sisters who perform harp music.

Many of the activities are rooted in the organization's faith-based spiritual foundation. Advent is the religious season observed during the four weeks prior to Christmas in anticipation of the nativity. The cornerstone of the tradition is the advent wreath which holds four candles, one of which is lit every week before Christmas.

Mercy Circle resident Sister Cathleen Cahill speaks reverently about the lighting of the advent wreath. Participants sing special hymns and recite Bible readings. "We are inspired by a sense of hope," says Cahill.

Advent is a time of reflection and expectation, says Cahill, in contrast to the flurry of social activities around the holiday. The atmosphere in the chapel during advent is somewhat somber.

But on Christmas Eve, the chapel is transformed with lighted wreaths and a beautiful nativity scene. The mass features Christmas music, including a trumpet. "It's very upbeat," says Cahill. The service is followed by a multicourse meal. The community also holds a Christmas Day mass and a buffet lunch.

Cahill notes that the motto at Mercy Circle is "Life with Spirit." Reflecting on all the holiday activities at the community, she says: "Yes, we really do have life with spirit."

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