

Navigating A World Of Mean Girls And New Friends At A Retirement Community

By Stacey Burling

What do high schools and independent living facilities for the elderly have in common?

Lunch rooms, cliques and mean girls. And, eventually, true friends.

It took Minna Duchovnay at least a year to feel like the Quadrangle, a sprawling retirement community in Haverford, was home. She came just before Christmas in 2014, and her fellow residents seemed preoccupied with the holidays or the flu. A new neighbor warned her, “You’re going to feel like you’re living in a hotel for at least a year.” There was some truth to it. She had come from an apartment building where people socialized easily and often. At her new home, people spent little time in each others’ apartments. They socialized through a cornucopia of activities and dinner plans. Finding dining companions was an important part of her new social world.

“I’m not used to having to make reservations with people,” she said. She learned that some groups were more welcoming than others. “There are meanies here,” she said.

Gradually, she met people and learned to make dinner dates. “It’s daunting, really daunting,” she said. She understands why some people resist leaving their long-time homes. “When you make a change, you know what you’re changing from,” she said in her art-filled two-bedroom apartment, which has a view of a lovely linden tree. “When you go to a new place, you know you have to put both feet in the pond. ... A lot of people are scared I think to put their two feet into the pond.”

Duchovnay, 77, was one of 14 Quadrangle residents who took part in an unusual University of the Sciences class project. They were paired with 14 graduate-level occupational therapy students so the students could see what it’s like to work with the “well elderly” and explore the transition to living in a senior community rich with activities but populated by aging strangers. Wendy Fox and Adele Breen-Franklin, both assistant professors in the department of occupational therapy, oversaw the project, which was meant to help prepare students, to help solve and prevent problems and also promote long-term quality of life.

Breen-Franklin conceived of the project after visiting with her mother-in-law, Claire Franklin, who lives at the Quadrangle, a leafy senior living complex founded by Haverford College professors in the late 1980’s, and has an elaborate schedule of eating plans and activities. Breen-Franklin saw how much work it was for the older woman to make new friends, and she heard about the challenges of finding dining companions.

The students visited their residents at least 10 times. They assessed quality of life, tried to help with functional problems and listened as the residents, many of whom had been successful professionals, talked about their old and new lives. The residents seemed to be doing so well, Breen-Franklin said, that the students wondered how they could be useful. As they listened more, they found that some of the residents had been falling. Others had memory or sleep problems. Some were having trouble navigating this new culture.

The overarching theme, Fox said, was a “sense of loneliness that really came through.” Also, some were adjusting to infirmities and a loss of important roles. How would they use their time now and find purpose?

All new residents face the same socially challenging situation as students: finding a group we want to eat with that also wants them.

“It wasn’t so far from high school or junior high,” Breen-Franklin said.

The Quadrangle has a welcoming committee whose members may invite a new resident to dinner once, she said, but that may not be enough.

Duchovnay’s dinner challenges were further complicated by the fact that she is on Weight Watchers. The dining room food was good — and too tempting. She decided to eat fewer meals there. Duchovnay, who enjoys writing her own poetry and translating Latin poetry, threw herself into other activities to make new friends. She joined an integration support group and a resident board where she could use her business experience to modernize some financial records. At 77, she thinks a lot of people wait too long to leave their homes. They should do it, she said, while they are young enough to invest energy in new friendships and activities.

Claire Franklin, who also participated in the University of the Sciences study, moved with her husband to the Quadrangle in 2012 at the age of 83. He was hospitalized three weeks later and died five weeks after that. She spent much of the next few months grieving at a son’s house and wondering whether she should have let him convince her to move. Quadrangle residents reached out to her and asked her to join them at dinner when she was ready. “They’d say, ‘When you’re in the mood, eat with us.’ Then I did and that half hour made such a difference.” She thinks she likely would have gotten less support at her old neighborhood. Ultimately, she was glad that she had dealt with the stress of downsizing and moving before her husband of 56 years died.

At 89, she is a busy, and happy, member of the community now. She has regular dinner dates with different group Monday through Thursday. She takes Friday off to enjoy an unscheduled evening. She is a member of the hospitality committee and joined a jewelry making group, which helped her meet people. She works in the gift shop, and plays poker and Scrabble. She works out three times a week. She tries to ease the transition for shyer newcomers.

Anne Wood is one of those less outgoing residents. She moved in with her husband when she was 65 — she’s 92 now — and, six years after his death, still misses his easy sociability. She goes to the grill by herself and eats with whoever is around. “I miss Howard,” she said. “He made the plans. He made the friends. He made it easy for me.”

She keeps herself happy by painting and reading. She played a murderer in a play recently. She’s volunteering with kindergarteners at a nearby school.

It took Joan Bernstein, 85, who moved in in 2014, almost three years to feel settled. She thinks the Quadrangle needs more support groups. A former therapist, she was initially attracted to the intellectual atmosphere there, but learned that emotional connection was harder to find. Now, she’s more attracted to the “feeling life.” She discovered through talking with her University of Sciences student that she likes helping people who are a “little lost.” She seeks friends with “a certain kind of warmth that I need in my life.”

It does not feel like high school to her. “I’ve sort of made a place for myself here that I’m comfortable with,” she said, “and I avoid people that feel like poison to me.” She does feel lonely sometimes, but says that can’t be helped. “Mainly, what I’m lonely for are people who are gone,” she said.

Life at the Quadrangle now “suits my purposes. I’m a realist,” Bernstein said. Her new life is “not what it was when I was younger. Nothing is.”

Duchovnay said her student helped her realize she was adjusting better than she had thought. Franklin’s helped her sleep better and suggested ways to make her apartment safer. She enjoyed the experience. “I found it very lovely to have this young man coming,” she said.

Student Chris Wallace has a special interest in sleep and loved being able to help Franklin with her insomnia. “It was an incredible experience,” he said.