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The dining experience

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Brain Waves:

Cultivating brain health at Asbury Methodist Village



In this program, older adults learn about aspects of brain health—from brain-healthy foods to brain-damaging stress—and things they can do to maximize it

This article profiles a recipient of the 2014 ICAA Innovators Achievement Award, a category of the Innovators Awards program recognizing programs and concepts that advance active aging. Presented in three categories, the annual Innovators Awards honor creativity and excellence in the active-aging industry. They highlight innovations that lead the way, set new standards, and make a difference in the lives of older adults.

In 2016, “Asbury Methodist Village will celebrate 90 years of serving seniors in the Washington, DC, area,” shares

Director of Lifestyle and Wellness Cathy Richards. What began in 1926 as a Methodist home for orphans and older adults is today one of the largest continuing care retirement communities (CCRCs) in the United States. About 1,300 men and women reside in the Gaithersburg, Maryland, community—in villas, apartments and “Courtyard Homes” as well as assisted-living and healthcare suites. The scenic 130-acre campus also includes a wildlife preserve.

As one of five locations affiliated with Asbury Communities, a not-for-profit aging services organization that sprang from Asbury Methodist Village, the Gaithersburg CCRC “provides life-enriching services for residents,” Richards says. “Asbury’s mission is to do all the good we can by providing excep-

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Asbury Methodist Village residents learn about the importance of exercise to brain health in the Brain Waves program



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Brain Waves, an educational program offered over eight weeks, offers residents of Asbury Methodist Village information about the brain and the steps they can take to improve their brain health. Each class typically includes instruction, discussion and a practical exercise

tional lifestyle opportunities to those we serve,” she continues. “Wellness is an integral part of the mission, and so we support older adults in staying healthy, active and engaged in life in myriad ways.”

The on-campus wellness hub is the Rosborough Cultural Arts and Wellness Center. Amenities include a heated indoor pool and spa, fitness center, theater, library, technology center, television production studio, café and indoor walking trail, plus several community rooms. “We provide senior-specific fitness testing and personalized exercise programs, more than 30 fitness classes per week, educational seminars, and numerous recreational and cultural arts off-campus trips,” Richards notes.

Residents also get involved in leadership committees, mentoring, volunteering, community events, lifelong-learning opportunities, programs and clubs.

Escalating resident interest in brain health led Asbury Methodist Village to launch a program in 2013 called “Brain Waves.” This program educates participants about brain health and how to cultivate it. “We weren’t sure how Brain Waves would be received,” admits Wellness Associate and Brain Fitness Facilitator Susan Grotenhuis. “But the residents have embraced it, and it’s opened up the path for other brain-fitness initiatives.”

To learn more about Brain Waves, the *Journal on Active Aging*[®] recently asked Richards and Grotenhuis to delve into

what the program involves and how it has contributed to Asbury Methodist Village and the older adults it serves.

JAA: *Please describe the Brain Waves program in brief.*

SG: Brain Waves is an educational program designed to help residents understand how the brain works and how to improve their brain health. Each eight-week session focuses on various aspects of brain health. A typical class includes an instructional and discussion component followed by a practical exercise pertaining to the subject matter. For example, during a lesson on brain-healthy foods, we make and sample recipes

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Asbury Methodist Village's Brain Waves program includes information about brain-healthy foods. Participants enjoy sampling dishes made with these types of ingredients

utilizing those ingredients and try other good foods for the brain.

JAA: *What was the catalyst for the Brain Waves program? And what were/are the program's goals or objectives?*

CR: Brain health and cognitive abilities have significant implications for quality of life and longevity. Dementia and general loss of brain function is a top fear among adults of all ages, while ways to keep your brain sharp receive significant media attention. Because brain fitness is an area of such interest, we have offered general "brain game"-type classes on our general wellness class schedule for many years. Two years ago, the passionate interest of several residents prompted us to create an in-depth program. We invested in having a wellness staff member obtain the Senior Fitness Association's Brain Fitness Facilitator certification and set out creating the curriculum for Brain Waves.

The program's goals are to provide a comprehensive look at the brain, how it

functions, and what we can do to maximize brain health as we get older. Participants are taught what to eat, how to reduce brain-damaging stress, and why physical, social and mental activity are important to overall brain health.

JAA: *What are the key elements of Brain Waves, and why?*

SG: One of the program's primary advantages is that it was designed with the older adult in mind. We wanted to provide current information that is both valuable and useful to Asbury residents; because we created the curriculum ourselves, we were able to accomplish that. Assignments play an important role in the program's success. Every week homework assignments are given to help the residents reinforce what they've learned. The class also includes a final project in which the participants are asked to research a topic new to them or learn a new skill and then give a presentation to the class. Finally, there is a strong social element to the class because we limit enrollment to 15 people. A lot of bond-

ing takes place and new friendships are formed over the course of the program.

JAA: *How do you structure and deliver the program's various components?*

SG: As mentioned earlier, each session covers eight weeks and we generally offer it twice a year, once in the spring and once in the fall. We've varied the day and time the class is offered in order to reach as many people as possible. We charge residents USD\$69 and offer

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Five key steps involved in offering a Brain Waves-type initiative

1. **Budget the time.** A substantial amount of resources may be needed to get a program off the ground. Identify the personnel and dedication of resources needed to begin.
2. **Get educated.** Whether you study on your own or take a course, it's important to start with a basic understanding of the topic (see "Suggested reading list" on page 42).
3. **Sculpt a plan.** Every community is unique. Structure the program to suit your clients and their needs. You may want to use a four-week format, for example.
4. **Create a varied approach.** Complement the program's theoretical aspects with lots of practical elements. Be creative and add your own flare.
5. **Adjust along the way.** Be prepared to make changes in order to make it work.

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the program to people living outside Asbury for USD\$85. The class location changes based on the needs of the lesson. For example, we include a physical activity when we talk about exercise, and we need a space that's conducive to that. The stress-reduction class includes guided imagery and participants lie on the floor, so we use a carpeted room for that lesson. We often have guests drop in to contribute their expertise in certain areas—these guests might be residents or staff. There is a lot of variety within the structure of the eight lessons.

JAA: *What does the Brain Waves program require practically in order to deliver it?*

SG: Fortunately, not a lot of resources are needed. Most of the effort came with the original creation of the program. This included the certification program to become a cognitive facilitator and the time invested in reading and watching a lot of material before assembling the curriculum. We went on to purchase a brain model and detailed medical poster with some of the revenue from the first Brain Waves course.

At the start of each eight-week session, we buy binders and print the lessons for participants. Music is used in a couple of the sessions or occasionally we might show a video, but we keep the technology simple. The right space for each class is needed, as mentioned before—and that's about it. There is some administrative support in promoting the program, taking registrations, processing payments, etc. We also have a page on our website devoted to the Brain Waves class.

JAA: *How did you introduce and promote Brain Waves to Asbury residents, and how have they responded?*

CR: We introduced Brain Waves to residents using the same multipronged communication avenues used to promote all of our wellness programs—flyers in

every building, posts on our campus TV scroll, an appearance on the front cover of our monthly wellness newsletter, and coverage in our monthly administrative report. To promote each session, we also make announcements at our regular classes and leverage word-of-mouth with resident wellness champions on campus. The response has been very positive, with strong enrollment for every session.

JAA: *Most programs encounter challenges. What challenges have you encountered with the Brain Waves program, and how have you addressed them?*


SG: The biggest challenge is staying informed and current. The field of brain health is constantly changing and evolving, and it's a complex subject. The more I teach the class, the more concrete the knowledge becomes. We try hard to keep updated on new research and the latest breakthroughs. What's great is that many graduates of the program stop by my office and drop off articles they've read either in a newspaper or journal.

JAA: *How has Asbury Methodist Village reached out through Brain Waves to support older adults living in the greater community?*

CR: We have coordinated with the City of Gaithersburg Senior Centers to advertise Brain Waves to their members. In addition, we have shared several brain-health related articles that also promote the program through the Asbury Perspective, a consumer blog designed for aging persons and adult children of aging parents. Content on this website is shared via Facebook and Twitter, as well as on Asbury Methodist Village's website, Asbury's four other CCRC sites, and the corporate Asbury.org website. Brain-fitness articles have also been distributed nationally via a syndicated newspaper article, reaching hundreds of thousands of readers through the newspapers who picked up the story; and posted locally, via Montgomery

County's public access channel 21. We have also contributed posts to the Brain Speak blog.

JAA: *What do you consider Brain Waves' most notable outcomes? And, in your view, how has the program helped advance active aging at Asbury Methodist Village?*

SG: Cultivating a healthy brain, fortunately, involves much more than burying your head in a crossword book. So much of what we teach in the Brain Waves program transfers to the wellness concept. Students may be eating more fruits and veggies in an effort to boost their antioxidant levels to clear toxins from the brain, while reaping a host of other wellness benefits. That goes for exercise, stress reduction, plenty of sleep and other brain-health strategies. Knowing that someone has made a lifestyle change for the better makes it all worthwhile. 

The Journal on Active Aging thanks Cathy Richards and Susan Grotenhuis for their help with this article. For more information about Asbury Methodist Village, visit www.asburymethodistvillage.org.

Images courtesy of Asbury Methodist Village

Suggested reading list

Fernández, A., & Goldberg, E. (2009). *The SharpBrains Guide to Brain Fitness*. San Francisco, CA: SharpBrains, Inc.

Restak, R. (2010). *Think Smart: A Neuroscientist's Prescription for Improving Your Brain's Performance*. New York, NY: Riverhead Books

Cohen, G. (2006). *The Mature Mind: The Positive Power of the Aging Brain*. New York, NY: Basic Books