

How BridgePoint at Los Altos Addresses Social Isolation

An Activity Companionship Case Study

BridgePoint
at Los Altos



mon ami



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Introduction

Even when they're in a facility designed to provide a sense of community, it can be possible for older adults to suffer from loneliness. Staving off that loneliness and reaching out to all their residents is a key goal for many facilities, especially as loneliness can also become associated with impaired health and physical frailty. Those issues, in turn, make it harder for the people affected to get out of a social rut.

One of the key methods of addressing this problem has turned out to be [engaging seniors in](#) one-on-one sessions that are planned and carried out in a partnership between the facility and dedicated companions. [Mon Ami Companions](#) and BridgePoint at Los Altos provide a case study of how that kind of partnership can work.

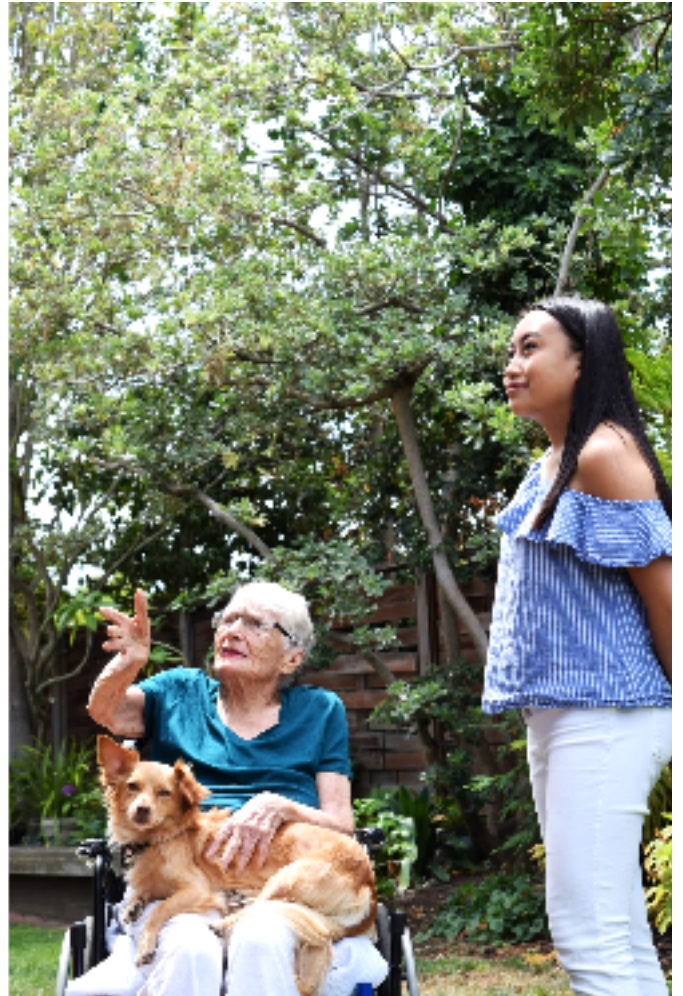


“ Working with Mon Ami companions has brought so much delight and connection to our harder-to-reach residents. That makes our families happy, and it makes us happy. ”

About BridgePoint at Los Altos

BridgePoint at Los Altos is one of over two dozen facilities run by [Kisco Senior Living](#). It serves 124 residents in Los Altos, California. The community provides independent living and assisted living for those residents. The former is for seniors who want to retain their independent lifestyles without carrying the burden of maintaining their own home; the latter provides relative independence inside a framework that involves more direct support of activities of daily living and medical assistance for those in need.

The company's [statement of values, principles and beliefs](#) commits to enhancing the lifestyles of residents by "responding immediately to residents' needs and concerns." It does so via the creative design of programs to meet resident needs, by encouraging independence and by "promoting a sense of community and friendship." Wellness is a major part of this mandate, and to put this in the words of Fidel Soria Gaytani, BridgePoint's Wellness Director:



“ [Wellness] covers the spiritual, emotional, intellectual, [and] social. We need to make sure this place feels like home. Some residents don't like to look at it that way [as home], but at least they want to feel comfortable . . . We have a great staff who go above and beyond for residents. We go the extra mile. You make people feel happy, and you bond with them, and it feels great when you can make people feel happy.”

- Fidel Soria Gaytani, BridgePoint Wellness Director



Mike Wenstrand, BridgePoint's Director of Business Development, describes it as "one of the kindest, most polite, caring places I've ever worked in my life." He attributes much of what makes the community unique to the dedication of its staff.

For example, BridgePoint's culinary standards are upheld by Chef Kevin, former owner of his own chain of restaurants and an educated chef who avoids most frozen and canned food in favor of fresh fare. As Mike describes his extensive involvement in eleven years of community life outside the kitchen: "You'll find Kevin not just in the kitchen, but playing chair volleyball, doing art class with the residents . . . He's just an amazing person, the heart of the community."

It's the commitment of the BridgePoint staff to building a warm and welcoming community that ultimately led to their identifying a potential shortfall in their ability to engage with their residents, and that persuaded them to reach out to Mon Ami.

The Challenge: Engaging Hard-to-Reach Residents and Preventing Loneliness



In an environment like BridgePoint, it might be surprising to find that loneliness can still be an issue for some seniors. After all, this is a community where the staff goes out of its way to engage with residents, providing everything from access to personal trainers to a planned schedule of social outings and educational events as part of an impressive array of services. No matter how much support a senior living facility provides, however, there's no way around certain realities.

- Loneliness is a subjective experience. There are different kinds of loneliness, one of the most painful kinds being what's called "emotional loneliness" or the absence of a personal, intimate attachment. It's possible to feel lonely even when surrounded by other people, especially if one is experiencing emotional loneliness of this kind, missing the company of close family and friends

who are no longer around while the new company on offer consists largely of unfamiliar faces (however well-intentioned). When in the grip of this kind of loneliness, mustering the desire to join in scheduled social activities can get more difficult, since among the health effects of loneliness is depression.

- Some residents may simply prefer to avoid group activities. Some people are shyer, quieter or more introverted than others and prefer to avoid large group activities for this reason. For some seniors, having decades of friendships formed and lost over the years, forming new attachments and engaging in social activities focused on doing so can prove difficult. As Fidel Gaytani puts it, "[We] also have quieter residents, people who [prefer] staying in their room. Those are the residents who fall under the radar . . . It's very hard to get friends, especially when you get older. Some people feel like times are changing, and they feel like an outsider."
- Physical limitations can play a role. It can simply be physically prohibitive for a resident to engage in regular group social activities, particularly if they have limited mobility or tend to be bedbound.

The possibility of residents falling through the social cracks because of these factors was a source of serious concern to BridgePoint's staff. As mentioned above, loneliness correlates with increased depression — itself a serious illness with a range of potential physical and mental effects. Beyond even that, however, loneliness can also result in increased stress levels, higher risk of cardiovascular disease and stroke, altered brain function, the quicker advancement of dementia and other negative effects. It's definitely a health risk in itself that needs addressing.

As hard as they work to address everyone's needs across the spectrums of physical, mental, social and emotional, BridgePoint's staff can't always spend a half-hour or more with individual residents on a daily basis and dig deep into what may be affecting them. As Mike Wenstrand says, "All of us on staff are charged with the responsibility of engagement and knowing our residents and their families. That's just part of the level of care we want to bring to them. But it's never enough, and we can always do more."

The Solution: How BridgePoint Used Mon Ami To Provide Social Engagement

This is where Mon Ami Companions came into the picture. Mon Ami's model of companion care [promotes inter-generational contact](#), which has a wide range of benefits both for the young and for older adults. Particularly relevant to BridgePoint's challenges, as the [Legacy Project](#) reports: "Active, involved older adults with close intergenerational connections consistently report much less depression, better physical health and higher degrees of life satisfaction."

For that matter, college students of the current era, who are at [just as much risk of loneliness](#) as seniors or even more so, derive many of those same benefits from the chance to act as a care companion for an older adult.

To provide these benefits, Mon Ami matches students with seniors who may benefit from added social engagement. The company selects students for social and emotional intelligence, and in particular those who have some prior experience interacting with elders, including seniors with dementia. Commonly this is used to provide additional support to family caregivers in a home setting, but it can also be used in a senior living community, and BridgePoint reached out to accomplish just that.

The steps in the process of setting up the partnership are outlined below.

- **Identifying the need.** BridgePoint's activities director identified several residents who seemed withdrawn from social activities and seemed to get less social interaction over the course of a typical week. Some had been recently released from the hospital and were bedbound, with few frequent visitors. These residents were slated for one-on-one weekly visits with Mon Ami companions for half an hour or more.
- **Booking and briefing companion care.** Mon Ami companions were given lists of residents to visit, along with information on their backgrounds. BridgePoint integrated the assignments of these companion care workers into its offerings and covered the expenses.
- **Weekly visits.** Mon Ami provided up to six hours of companion care visits a week, with two to three companions spending about 30 to 60 minutes each with residents BridgePoint had identified as needing more company.



The arrangement is still ongoing six months later and showing positive results for everyone involved.

The Outcomes

Over the course of six months, Mon Ami delivered 120 hours of companion care to the residents of BridgePoint Los Altos. Staff have reported residents being more engaged after their visits. Mike Wenstrand describes one of the residents: "I can speak to Terri specifically. She seems much more engaging, much more engaged with others, more willing to engage. I saw her a lot more alone before. I think it has [given her a] refresher that talking to other folks is fun. Learning from others is fun. I think she just needed a reminder that it can be fun to engage."

We can take a tour of the outcomes through the eyes of one companion, Preet. One of the residents Preet visited, Pat, used the visits to begin writing her memoir.

"[Pat] has a lot of stories, so I told her that every time I come I will transcribe at least one and then at the end, we can print it out as she discussed earlier. I was pleasantly surprised to learn that all her stories are her own life experiences, and she wants to create a book with her stories to leave a piece of her at BridgePoint, which I thought was just marvelous! She was super happy once I finished transcribing the first story, and she's super excited for my return to continue with the rest of the stories. I will keep her stories saved in my laptop, and can't wait to see the final result once all the stories have been transcribed, and most importantly can't wait to see Pat's reaction."



Preet also met with Beena, a new arrival who had been bedbound due to a recent operation.

"Today I had the pleasure of meeting a new resident, Beena. She is a lovely woman and I could tell she was so excited to see me! We got to know each other and she told me that she is having a difficult time adjusting at BridgePoint because she can't talk to anyone about the recent events. I look forward to meeting her next week and she's also excited about my next week's visit."

And Preet visited Ruth, who had recently experienced a loss.

"It was bittersweet meeting [Ruth] because she's always with her friend Beverly, but today when I asked about Beverly, Ruth informed me she passed away this weekend. It was evident that Ruth was lonely and appreciated my company and was happy that I'd be visiting next week as well. She expressed how she doesn't speak to many people and Beverly was the one friend she had who always came and joined Ruth in her room. Next time I am visiting BridgePoint, I will check on Ruth and make sure she's feeling better."

The visit logs of the Mon Ami companions are full of these kinds of stories, which in themselves are a succinct description of the value of this model of companion care.

Further Benefits

This partnership with Mon Ami has yielded further benefits for the staff and residents of BridgePoint at Los Altos.

- Expanding the team and delivering wellness. BridgePoint's broad-based definition of wellness isn't an easy mandate to fulfill without help. By filling in parts of the schedule that BridgePoint staff weren't previously able to cover, Mon Ami's companions have provided that help. Fidel



Gaytani describes Mon Ami's contribution: "It's covered that part of wellness where if we can't get to those residents, you guys are there for us. You're part of the team, you're helping, you're bonding with them. All these young people, they're very creative . . . they pick up games, they ask me for stuff that they can do with the people they're visiting . . . sometimes we're busy planning, and the Mon Ami people are there to be with someone. They're there for us when we can't be there. They're wellness."

- Providing peace of mind for families. Families that may have been concerned about socially-isolated loved ones now have peace of mind in knowing about the friendly, positive contact Mon Ami companions are providing. As Gaytani puts it: "Families love the idea of their parents having a friend to come over. They know their parents, and some are not very social . . . [so] when they hear that someone's specific task is to spend time and bond, they just love that idea."
- It brings joy and satisfaction to the students, too. As companion Marck put it: "From being a Mon Ami companion, I have created friendships that I never thought I would have created before. The deep connections made through the process is one of the main benefits." The staff at BridgePoint have noted that the students are genuinely in it for more than the money — that they really care about making these connections, and that this makes all the difference.

Conclusion

The ongoing, productive partnership between BridgePoint at Los Altos and Mon Ami provides strong evidence in favor of the important role companion care can play in overall health and wellness for seniors, and for society in general. Where generations come together, connections are forged and people have the opportunity to take simple joy in life and in learning about one another.



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