

English Rose Suites offers a new approach to managing dementia care

BY FRANK JOSSI

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English Rose Suites looks like a fairly typical 1960s-style home in Edina, although a touch more bucolic than many suburban enclaves. Sitting on a hill overlooking Braemar Golf Course, the home is a community to five residents with dementia, among them a former Supreme Court justice.

Jayne Clairmont operates four other English Rose homes in Edina and Wayzata focused on dementia care, a huge, growing and expensive challenge for the state and the country. More than 5.2 million Americans today suffer Alzheimer's disease; by 2030 the figure will escalate to 14 million. Minnesota alone has 94,000 with dementia, she said.

The problems of dementia care even briefly captured headlines in the Twin Cities earlier this year when former professional wrestler Verne Gagne caused an injury that led to the death of a former medical researcher and Holocaust survivor.

Clairmont found her calling after graduating from North Dakota State University and Moorhead State University in the 1980s in public relations and interior design. A marketing position with Kensington Cottages Corporation led to opportunities to open what were then called "retirement hotels" for the elderly.

She liked the work even it hadn't been part of her original plan. "I always felt respect for older people — it wasn't the cliché 'I love old people,' it was real, but I had no desire to go into gerontology," she recalled. "I was thinking of opening a day care and ended up at the other end of the spectrum."

Smaller is better

In the 1980s Clairmont was at the beginning of a movement that became known as "assisted living." Hired by Kensington Cottage Corp., she began working with its founder, Jon Rappaport, a pioneer in senior housing in the Twin Cities and nationally. First, she helped run a senior home in Fargo-Moorhead for two years before heading to Minneapolis.

The company assigned Clairmont to oversee the renovation and staffing of a former Iowa hospital and a New Mexico hotel into senior care facilities. In 1992, as care centers began to struggle with a growing number of patients with dementia, Kensington asked Clairmont to become a student of memory care.

She traveled to San Diego elsewhere to learn from experts about dealing with patients suffering Alzheimer's disease. During the 1990s, Rappaport and Clairmont created the "Kensington Cottages" model to treat dementia, employing a high staff to patient ratio and a living arrangement where patients resided in fourplex apartments located on one level and interconnected.

"She was instrumental in the success of my company," said Rappaport.

After Kensington was twice acquired, Clairmont left the company (now called Sunrise Living) and developed, with a partner, English Rose Suites. The five English Rose residences have 29 patients in total and a one-to-three staff ratio. Studies have shown dementia patients struggle mightily in larger facilities because they get easily confused and lost.

Another element of success is training. "It's about staff education, it's about teaching that employee everything you can about dementia care," she said. "I can't emphasize enough how important staff training is, and it's ongoing, it's a journey of learning. You keep teaching and keep empowering your employees with new information. That's what I think we do better than most environments."

Intensive training

New English Rose employees receive 56 hours of classroom training, along with many hours of working with a mentor. Staff studies how the brain works, what Alzheimer's does to the mind and why people act the way they do in care environments, she said.

Many problems between residents and staff come down to communication,



"Jayne is really unique, she's the greatest natural caregiver I have ever known," senior-housing pioneer Jon Rappaport says of Jayne Clairmont, above. (Staff photo: Bill Klotz)

she said, with caregivers sometimes having to understand a subtle insult is meaningless and may serve as an example of attachment rather than disrespect. Maintaining a distance to patients is not required, Clairmont said, and she gives staff "permission to love these patients" as they would a friend or family member.

Another part of Clairmont's approach is to create a defined schedule for patients and caregivers. "A lot of these people need a structured setting, it's not militaristic, but it's structured with commonality of care," she said.

Clairmont said her prevailing philosophy is "honoring residents on this difficult journey." The issue with some care facilities becomes a concentration on the clinical-based approach rather than a more holistic, human approach that involves understanding each person's life story.

Over 25 years of "making mistakes," as Clairmont cheerfully confessed, she has earned national recognition for her groundbreaking approaches to caring for residents. She testified before a congressional committee in the 1980s, developed care approaches with the Mayo Clinic's Alzheimer's Disease Center and focused intensely on creating a body of best practices for caregivers working in memory care communities.

"Jayne is really unique, she's the greatest natural caregiver I have ever known," said Rappaport. "Nationally, she's very well known as a leader in Alzheimer's care ... and she's created one of the most successful models of caring for Alzheimer's patients in the country."

In addition, Clairmont helped found the Assisted Living Federation of America and serves on the board of the Minnesota-North Dakota Alzheimer's Association. A final project, Pathways For Elders, is a nonprofit she started that is working on plans for providing more affordable, and excellent, dementia care. Not everyone, she knows, can afford the daily \$300 to \$450 cost of English Rose Suites.

The key, in the end, to caring for patients with memory loss comes down to a simple approach, said Clairmont. "It's about treating residents with respect, families with respect and staff with respect," she said. "It's about honoring our residents and their histories."