

GenCare's Whole Food, Whole Life program supports living well for residents



Part of an overall 'whole life' approach to aging, this senior living provider's culinary initiative provides residents with meals made from fresh, whole and organic natural foods

This is the final article in a series of eight profiling the recipients of the 2008 ICAA Innovators Awards. Presented by the International Council on Active Aging®, these awards honor excellence and creativity in the health and wellness field, and recognize organizations that have created cut-

ting-edge offerings for active aging. In 2005, the awards program expanded to include the Equipment Innovator category. ICAA is an association that supports professionals who develop wellness and fitness facilities and services for adults 50 and over.

With more than 28 years experience in real estate development and 20 years in the retirement industry, Leon Grundstein founded GenCare Lifestyle "to provide a premier senior living environment with options that promote a healthy and robust atmosphere." From his years of

being a sprinter at the University of Michigan to his current passions for running, yoga and playing softball, Grundstein has always known that "what you do with your body influences your quality of life." So he initiated the Whole Life Living™ concept and began creating what he believes is a new approach to wellness—one that simultaneously improves, and protects, the environment. The end goal? To ensure that residents of GenCare communities live in healthy and safe environments.

The Whole Food, Whole Life initiative is one element of the Seattle-based organization's Whole Life Living wellness program. It is a "staggering" challenge for retirement and assisted-living communities to feed large numbers of residents something delicious every day and keep them both healthy and satisfied, Grundstein observes. Yet "food is the foundation," he says. "It fuels the engines of your heart and mind. Without a proper diet, the body will not function optimally."

GenCare's professionally trained chefs prepare "tasty, nourishing meals for residents made from fresh, whole and organic natural foods," according to Grundstein. Ingredients include such things as organic produce, free-range poultry, wild fish and natural beef. With this focus on whole life dining, the culinary initiative "supports older adults who want to be well and eat well," he explains.

To find out more, the *Journal on Active Aging*® recently asked Grundstein, GenCare's president, to tell us more about the Whole Food, Whole Life initiative and how it contributes to the Whole Life Living wellness program.

JAA: *What is the Whole Life Living concept, and how does it relate to your organization's efforts "to reinvent how senior living communities are built and operated"?*

LG: Whole Life Living provides the foundation necessary to manage wellness and not illness, providing a premier living environment and robust senior lifestyle. Whole life concepts include per-

sonal well-being, decision-making and independence for residents. To translate this proprietary approach, we use the Whole Life Diamond [shown on page 84], which has the following four facets:

- Vitality
- Stay Sharp™
- Culinary (Whole Life™ Dining)
- Purpose

These components are essential to providing optimum quality of life for all ages, not just seniors.

JAA: *Please give us a little background about the other three components in the Whole Life Diamond. The rest of this article will focus on the culinary component.*

LG: GenCare's Whole Life Living components bring together the core areas of mind, body and spirit as follows:

Vitality. While there is no magic potion for maintaining physical, emotional and mental well-being, regular physical activity comes close. Communities have Vitality Centers equipped with fitness equipment and specialized programs designed for the older adult. Residents can boost flexibility, balance, strength and mental acuity by attending classes led by trained instructors and one-on-one personal training sessions.

Stay Sharp. By providing Stay Sharp Centers and emphasizing mental fitness, we are able to enhance the mental awareness of our residents. These centers, along with a multitude of social activities, help residents maintain emotional and mental well-being. For example, residents can check email, surf the Internet, use Skype to talk with loved ones, and play Wii bowling or golfing.

Purpose. We advocate and focus on the intention to live life to its fullest by pledging to commit to all of the Whole Life principles with passion and helping our residents discover the power of purpose along the way. Our goal is to create pathways to help residents stay engaged in the world around them, as well as tap into their life experiences.

JAA: *How did you go about developing the Whole Food, Whole Life initiative?*

LG: We began program development by consulting with nationally recognized naturopathic universities. They viewed all of our menus and recipes to assist in updating our culinary program from the ground level.

Our dietary department learned healthier ways to prepare and combine food, as well as to order ingredients. Cutting out as much processed food as possible, culinary staff started including fresh, locally grown, in-season foods. Even our condiments received a remodel! The result was meals with improved flavors, colors and textures as whole foods were introduced into our dining rooms.

Every day we are reminded of how our food, together with the comprehensive dietary measures we have taken, benefit our residents and their overall health. The positive feedback from residents and their families reinforces our mission to provide wholesome foods that are not laden with calories, carbohydrates and preservatives.

We know that what goes into our body influences how we feel. By taking a "whole life" approach to aging, we can influence our health, our strength, our stamina and our longevity with a better diet.

JAA: *What was involved practically in implementing a healthy, whole-food approach to dining?*

LG: Discovery and research for Whole Food, Whole Life took more than two years, in order to secure the credible partnerships necessary to successfully execute the program. Because it was important to capture comments on menus for all four seasons, there was a 12-month process we called the Program Implementation Plan. The three phases of the rollout plan were as follows:

- Phase one involved staff education, meal reviews and educational seminars to residents and their families at three communities.
- Phase two involved the above tactics for three more of our communities, as well as identifying pros and cons on comments for all six communities.

- Phase three involved a lot of fine-tuning of seasonal menus based on feedback, innovative food strategies and recruiting alliances to help us communicate our message.

To implement our Whole Life Living messages, the major vehicle we have used is consistent and frequent communication. For Whole Food, Whole Life, we have used traditional communication and marketing vehicles, newsletters, food demos, educational seminars and marketing collateral to propel our message internally and externally.

Although the program is fully implemented, we continue to recruit partners (i.e., local companies that support our message). We also emphasize education for our staff, residents and their families by opening our doors to them and the community to participate in Whole Life Living programs.

JAA: *Did you encounter challenges in switching to healthier dining across GenCare's six communities? And if so, how did you address them?*

LG: Yes, we did experience a few challenges. Initially, our messaging to residents resulted in some confusion. In the minds of our residents, "organic" and "naturopathic" were perceived as new age, too expensive and too trendy; however, we made tremendous headway after retooling our communications and speaking the same language as residents. Truly listening to residents gave us the perspective we needed to be successful. They quickly embraced our culinary mission when we shared that we were trying to provide them with foods they grew up with—fresh, raw foods with essential nutrients and without preservatives or that fast-food mentality. And once residents tasted the food, there was no hesitation with acceptance.

Any change is often hard for residents to embrace. Still, the initiative has been received positively because we "overcommunicated" the benefits of eating a wholesome diet. Most importantly, our residents' families and loved ones have

Continued on page 84

GenCare's Whole Food, Whole Life program supports living well for residents

Continued from page 83



GenCare Lifestyle's Whole Life Diamond

seen improvements in their family members due to the improved diet.

JAA: *Does the Whole Food, Whole Life initiative help motivate residents to live well and to make the most of Whole Life Living?*

LG: Motivating individuals to live well is something we take very seriously. Although this effort can be challenging at times, we often get positive feedback from caregivers and family members, who commonly tell us that their loved ones “have so much more energy” and the like. Bottom line, many residents who have embraced the Whole Life Living program are doing much better.

JAA: *A whole life approach to aging brings up the question of the environment. Do you view Whole Food, Whole Life through an environmental lens, and, if so, how do you see the initiative?*

LG: Absolutely. In all areas we are reaching out and creating new partnerships that will help support our Whole Life Living mission. Whether it is through our residents' gardens or supporting our local farmer's markets, we are always exploring and adopting new green procedures.

Most recently, we received a Certificate of Merit 3-Stars rating in the Built Green category from the Master Builders Association of King and Snohomish

Counties, for GenCare Lifestyle at The Ballard Landmark. Building green has a vast impact on the natural environment, human health and the economy. By adopting green building strategies, we can maximize both economic and environmental performance.

JAA: *Looking at the overall GenCare picture, how do you include the environment in your efforts to promote healthy aging in your communities?*

LG: At all of our communities, we have installed energy-efficient lighting, as well as efficient Energy Star air conditioning for effective cooling. We also recycle waste. In addition, we have provided eco-friendly shopping bags to our residents, as well as educational programs on the benefits of eating raw foods.

JAA: *It's now two years since you introduced the Whole Food, Whole Life initiative at GenCare. How would you say residents have benefited?*

LG: Overall energy and vitality have improved. With our internal tracking and measurement system in place, we will be able to provide concrete results next year to support the success of our initiatives.

JAA: *And from an organizational perspective? What kind of impact has the initiative had?*

LG: In my view, no other community truly offers the programs we do. It is a true differentiating factor for our company. I am proud of the program implementation and execution that has happened in a short span of time.

As a marketing tool, the Whole Food, Whole Life concept has brought new excitement to the sales process and outreach to referral sources. We also are attracting staff who are dedicated and embrace the Whole Life Living lifestyle, which makes it easier to promote and implement.

JAA: *What were your initial goals for the Whole Food, Whole Life initiative? And how do you view the progress to date?*

LG: Our mission, day in and day out, is to deliver a first-class resident experience in a harmonious and Whole Life Living environment. With our culinary initiative, the goal was to make our residents healthier so they can live longer. However, even if longevity does not increase, quality of life will be improved. Good food helps reduce blood pressure, reduce evidence of cancer, increase energy, improve overall health, and increase blood flow to the brain. A healthy heart and brain mean better mental acuity. Ultimately, we want to see our residents be able to age in place and enjoy their later years at our communities. ☺

The Journal on Active Aging thanks Leon Grundstein and Tracey Harvey of GenCare Lifestyle for their help with this article. For more information about GenCare, visit www.gencare-inc.com.

Image courtesy of GenCare Lifestyle

Providing a successful whole-food initiative: five key steps

1. Refine hiring practices and hire passionate individuals with energy.
2. Build an implementation plan that includes a pilot period.
3. Communicate consistently and provide educational resources for staff and residents.
4. Create tools to share benefits of healthy eating practices.
5. Stay committed.