



# Pathway's Camp VIVA!

provides an outdoor  
adventure for assisted  
living residents

**For participants, an overnight camping trip opens up possibilities and encourages the belief that neither age nor physical limitations should prevent them from leading a full life**

*This is the second article in a series profiling the recipients of the 2010 ICAA Innovators Awards. Launched by the International Council on Active Aging® in 2003,*

*these awards recognize creativity and excellence in active aging, honoring innovations that are leading the way, setting new standards and making a difference in the lives of older adults. These offerings target any or all of the seven dimensions of wellness—namely, physical, spiritual, intellectual, social, emotional, vocational and environmental wellness. ICAA supports professionals who develop wellness facilities, programs and services for adults ages 50 and over.*



*Time spent engaging in nature helped Camp VIVA! participants recharge physically, emotionally and spiritually. Photo: Kelly Casey*

Integrity, professionalism, teamwork, responsibility and quality. These are the five core values of Chicago-based Pathway Senior Living, a for-profit provider of independent and assisted living communities in Illinois. On its website, Pathway defines each value. “Responsibility” is encapsulated as follows: “We are responsible for making a positive difference in the lives we touch.” One way the company makes that difference is through VIVA!™, its life enrichment program.

“VIVA! integrates the wellness/clinical and activity program aspects of community life at all 10 Pathway communities,” says Chief People Officer Maria Oliva. Meaning literally “long live”, VIVA! “is defined as a celebration of life or an enthusiastic expression of support,” Oliva notes. “The Pathway initiative takes a whole new approach to resident wellness and person-centered care by combining

services that address not just residents’ physical needs, but also the as-important nonclinical and non-ADL (Activity of Daily Living)-related requirements of a fulfilled and happy life.”

With the VIVA! program, “the focus is on abilities and interests, rather than disabilities and limitations,” Oliva continues. “Here a certified nursing assistant’s work goes well beyond the basics of tending to ADLs. Instead, CNAs are responsible for creating an environment where residents continue to learn and have choice, meaning and purpose in their lives through active engagement and personalized support.”

Introduced in 2010 as part of Pathway’s life enrichment initiative, Camp VIVA! is an “extreme” wellness program that gives assisted living residents the unconventional opportunity to camp overnight and experience the great outdoors,

Oliva explains. Last year, taking part in this camping trip helped 40 residents, ages 65–94, believe “that neither age nor physical limitations should prevent them from living a fulfilled life,” she says.

To learn more, the *Journal on Active Aging*® recently asked Oliva and her Pathway colleagues, Regional Life Enrichment Manager Colleen Koziara and Victory Centre of River Oaks Executive Director Helen Brown, to describe what is involved in planning and providing the Camp VIVA! experience.

**JAA:** *What does the Camp VIVA! program offer participants?*

**MO:** Camp VIVA! takes assisted living residents out of their day-to-day routines and familiar surroundings and brings them to a scenic, wooded camp-

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*Pathway's campers reveled in their sense of freedom and the camaraderie of others during their adventure. Photo: Kelly Casey*

ground on the edge of a lake, where they enjoy a 24-hour nature immersion—with one exception: Instead of sleeping bags, individuals sleep on cots in indoor cabins. The campground, Sunrise Lake, is handicapped accessible. Features such as paved walking paths, ramps and elongated picnic tables accommodate those who use walkers and wheelchairs, while Pathway support staff, including nursing staff, accompany the campers.

Camping is known to sharpen the mind, strengthen the body and recharge the soul, bringing our senior campers physical, emotional and spiritual benefits from their time spent outdoors. Pathway residents exercise their freedom of choice and independence when selecting from a diverse range of activities aimed at helping them engage with nature, including hiking, row boating, fishing, swimming, bird watching and outdoor crafting.

Nighttime brings more opportunities to bond and marvel at nature. Meals, including fresh fish caught earlier that day, are cooked over an open fire, and songs and stories are shared at the campfire under the moon and stars. Campers benefit from the camaraderie of others, a sense of accomplishment from the day's activities, and simply savoring the beauty of the outdoors.

**JAA:** *What key things do Pathway staff consider in planning the Camp VIVA! program? And how were these incorporated practically in the first camping trip?*

**CK:** There are six main points in planning:

- location
- sleeping arrangements
- transportation
- food

- nursing staff requirements
- medications

All must be considered based upon the specific needs of the residents who choose to attend, which means that what we need for one camping trip could differ drastically from the next. For example, 19 people in our first group of campers had diabetes and one was on liquid oxygen. So residents were arranged in two separate cabins—one group included those who were higher need and the other, those who were more independent. Staff were split between the buildings.

Last year, we transported 40 residents and cots with all their camping “gear” from 10 communities on three buses and in a variety of staff vehicles. Due to the distance between communities and the

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*Pathway's staff were 'tireless, knowledgeable and caring,' says Chief People Officer Maria Oliva. They hiked, hauled, rowed, cleaned fish, assembled cots, and more to make the Camp VIVA! experience memorable for participants. Photo: Kelly Casey*

fact that each bus picked up individuals from three to four locations, some of our campers had a three-hour bus ride. So, each community along the route provided toileting assistance to those on the bus who needed it.

Upon arrival at the campground, everyone disembarked from the buses and we found that, despite instructions to bring a pillow and one small bag, most residents had brought a minimum of three. A new system is in place for this year's luggage-tracking procedure.

From that point on, the event was completely resident led. Participants enjoyed their sense of freedom and the ability to do exactly what they wanted in whatever area of the camp they chose, with staff taking turns assisting in each area. Others helped with toileting runs.

Food was prepared onsite, either in the large commercial kitchen at Sunrise Lake or over the campfires, and eaten at the picnic tables outside. Evening included time around the bonfire, storytelling and skits prepared by residents and staff, as well as a drumming circle and even a little dancing. Campers headed towards bed beginning at 7 p.m., while the last few individuals turned in after 1 a.m. The first morning coffee request came at 4:30 a.m.

There were more activities after breakfast, including hiking and a final gathering. Then it was time to pack all the residents and their belongings and sack lunches onto the buses for the trip home. With the campers gone, we completed the disassembly and loading of 40 cots and the cleanup of all the food, equipment and areas at Sunrise Lake.

Most of our staff did not sleep at all on the camping trip. We hiked and cared for and hauled and rowed and cleaned fish and turned hotdogs and searched for the disappearing cans of mosquito repellent that became the trip's hot commodity. Still, when asked at our final gathering who would like to come back and camp again next year, every resident replied with a resounding, "Yes"—and our exhausted staff gave the same reply.

**JAA:** *How important was it to the program's success to have a location such as Sunrise Lake Campground, with its specially trained staff and adaptations for accessibility?*

**MO:** The accessibility and staff of Sunrise Lake were integral in the success of the first Camp VIVA! trip. When you think of camping, boating, swimming, hiking, and toasting marshmallows around a campfire, you do not usually consider how difficult—even impossible—these activities might be for someone who is in a wheelchair, uses a walker or needs assistance to transfer. These were nonissues for us because of the accessibility adaptations at Sunrise Lake.

Our staff and the Sunrise Lake staff worked seamlessly together. Though the usual campers at this campground are much younger than our group, we learned that their requirements were very similar and the Sunrise Lake staff found that they truly enjoyed working with our residents.

**JAA:** *How did you introduce Camp VIVA! to Pathway communities and encourage residents to participate? And what was the response?*

**CK:** The idea of going camping was presented first to our communities' executive directors, who presented it to their respective staff. In addition, I personally reviewed all the details with the community life managers in each community. The executive directors announced the

program at resident meetings, while the community life managers and life enrichment managers did daily “sales pitches” throughout the planning stages. Also, for the first trip, we requested staff volunteers who were experienced campers, and these staff members further helped to encourage and excite the residents about participating.

The biggest selling point, however, was the “But I can’t” conversation. By mutual agreement beforehand with Helen Brown, LPN, executive director of Victory Centre of River Oaks and our official Camp VIVA! nurse, we would not turn down any resident because of medical issues. So, when a resident began a conversation with “I would love to go camping, but I have \_\_\_\_\_ and can’t,” the staff response was, “So what, that’s not a problem. Should I sign you up?” Without question, our best advertisement was the surprise and delight on people’s faces when they realized that nothing could keep them from the trip, and their excitement in announcing they were going.

**JAA:** *What resources were required to provide the Camp VIVA! program, and how did Pathway fund the trip?*

**MO:** Pathway budgeted the cost of the camp in the annual shared budget for all communities. The cost of the camp included all facilities and activities, as well as the staff who were on-site for the event. The food, provided by our food service provider, cost the standard per diem amount of each camper’s meal program, which they would have participated in at the community. A number of the staff accompanying the campers were exempt. Those who were not came from all 10 communities, so no community had more than one nonexempt employee on the camping trip. In this way, neither community staffing patterns nor budgets were adversely affected. Normal bus trips were rearranged for the week to ensure all three Pathway buses were

available for drop-off/pickup runs, and one bus was on-site at all times in case of emergency. (Local fire and police departments were notified prior to the trip, so they were aware of the special population at Sunrise Lake should an emergency arise.)

**JAA:** *What was the most significant challenge Pathway had to address with the camping trip last year?*

**CK:** Sleeping arrangements. By far, this was the most challenging portion of the entire trip. Sleeping bags on the floor were not an option for this population and neither were air mattresses. So, we decided upon cots. Initially, it seemed unnecessary to purchase 40 cots for a once-a-year outing; however, cots are not available for rent any cheaper than they are for purchase. We also could not find any place willing to lend these to us. When we decided to purchase the cots, we were faced with a wide variety of choices and price ranges and much to consider. A narrow campers cot was not wide enough for some of our larger residents. It also did not have a sufficient weight limit. We finally purchased 40 heavy metal-framed military cots weight approved to 300 lbs.—the largest expense of the entire undertaking. Still, when it came down to it, the cots were the only part of the entire camping trip that residents didn’t like.

**HB:** We were also fortunate to have a Pathway community across the street from Sunrise Lake. Victory Centre of Bartlett was able to assist in securing a large oxygen tank last year that provided us with the means to fill portable tanks. Our Bartlett home was also able to set up a doctor to be on call. Each community provided us with a list of medications, emergency contacts and any needs a resident might have that would need to be addressed by medical staff. Most information was gathered prior to the camping trip to ensure we would have sufficient life enrichment aides and nurses.

### Five key steps to offering a camping initiative

1. Begin with a belief that a camping trip for assisted living residents is possible. Then, inspire excitement and interest for both staff and residents.
2. Expect to plan extensively.
3. Include staff with necessary skills and training to provide for the care needs of the residents (i.e., a nurse, certified nursing assistants, activities, etc.).
4. Be flexible and have fun. Not all the camping activities have to be planned. Encourage spontaneity and participant choices.
5. Debrief and review. Learn from the first experience and refine as necessary to improve future experiences.

**JAA:** *What were the key contributors to the success of Camp VIVA! in 2010, in your view?*

**MO:** A fabulous location; tireless, knowledgeable and caring staff; perfect weather, and adventurous residents all made this a success. But the main factor in the success of Camp VIVA! was the belief it was possible. Because, if all that was needed were the first four ingredients, someone would have done it long ago. ☺

*The Journal on Active Aging thanks Maria Oliva, Colleen Koziara and Helen Brown for their help with this article. For more information about Pathway Senior Living, visit [www.pathwaysl.com](http://www.pathwaysl.com).*

**Images courtesy of Pathway Senior Living**