

# Santa Cruz Sentinel

## I-You Venture: Reducing the Isolation

By Tara Fatemi Walker

3/31/2022

When a person first moves to a care facility, they naturally experience challenging emotions due to this big transition. As time goes on, these emotions may ebb and flow, but a sense of isolation often continues. This was exacerbated during the pandemic, and the local program I-You Venture stepped in to help.

I-You Venture is part of Family Service Agency of the Central Coast, which created I-You Venture in 1974 after a study showed that 58% of seniors in care facilities don't receive visitors from their "prior lives" (people they knew before entering a care facility). "The program was formed to serve the residents of skilled nursing and assisted living facilities, and to connect residents with the community" says Program Director Nancy Cleveland, who has been with Family Service Agency since 2015. "When people go into care facilities, they face many challenges including social, physical, and emotional. I-You Venture exists to reduce some of the isolation they may feel," Nancy explains. "Volunteers come in and help with arts and crafts, reading to residents, listening to music, playing board games, and doing one-on-one visits.

This allows residents to know someone cares."

Four of I-You Venture's original programs are Friendly Visitor (volunteers visit with residents), Ageless Art (volunteers lead art groups), Picnic in the Park (annual BBQ in Aptos Village Park with live music), and Holiday Helpers (gifts are collected and distributed). On March 11, 2020, everything changed. "Care facilities were put on quarantine and residents weren't allowed to have visitors," says Nancy.

“This was very difficult, and residents became more isolated.” They had to pause three programs (Friendly Visitor, Ageless Art, and Picnic in the Park) and hope to reinstate them in the future.

“Although quarantine guidelines have eased up, most care facilities still have limited visitation.”

I-You Venture created three new programs after the pandemic started, to connect with seniors to support them and let them know they are remembered. These are Thinking of You Cards, Ice Cream Day, and iPads for Seniors. Thinking of You began in 2020. “I-You Venture started collecting and distributing cards to seniors in care facilities,” says Nancy. “We have averaged 800-1,000 cards a month, along with various activity items (crossword puzzles, word search books and adult coloring books). This past Valentine’s Day we collected and distributed over 3,500 cards to 1,000 residents and brightened everyone’s day.”

Amanda Bartel, Life Enrichment Director at Aegis Living, is very grateful for all of the programs.

“The smiles that each and every item donated has put on our residents’ faces has been truly priceless,” she says. “My thanks to I-You Venture for enriching their lives. It warms my heart, and I am so glad we work together to bring joy to everyone in the simplest ways.” Aegis utilizes Thinking of You Cards, as well as Holiday Helpers. “They provide art supplies, inspirational and uplifting cards, games, and more for each resident for the holidays,” says Amanda. “The residents get really excited whenever I tell them we have had another donation!”

The iPad Program collects used iPads, to allow seniors to FaceTime with friends and family. The first Ice Cream Day event was held last September. “We distributed ice cream and cookies to 900 residents across 12 care facilities; a good time was had by all,” says Nancy.

Aegis was one of the participating care facilities.

“The ice cream social was a part of our happy hour celebration,” says Amanda. “The residents loved being able to try new ice cream flavors while enjoying live music.”

Lynnette Mello, former Activities Director at Westwind Memory Care, has high praise for I-You Venture. “The yearly picnics they organized at Aptos Village Park brought a lot of joy to many seniors,” she says. “These picnics have provided excellent entertainment, food, and an opportunity to connect with other facilities all over the county.” After the pandemic canceled the picnic, “...last summer Nancy brought decorations, cookies, and ice cream so we could have a fun, safe, outdoor party at Westwind. Everyone enjoyed it, including our staff,” adds Lynnette, who retired from her position in February.

“It is difficult to put into words how much the staff and residents of Westwind Memory Care appreciate the kindness and generosity of I-You-Venture.

Ever since the opening of our facility in 2017, the program has provided Westwind with quality volunteers and donated items to keep our activity department the very best it can be.

During the COVID-19 and local wildfire crises, I-You-Venture gathered from the community beautifully hand-crafted cards and letters to cheer residents,” says Lynnette. “They also provided art supplies, edible treats, pen pal addresses, and various workbooks to keep residents happy and occupied when we were in lockdown. Their generosity not only lifted the spirits of our residents but also gave encouragement to our weary staff members.”

Cynthia Reader, Activities Director at Pacific Coast Manor, says she and the residents are deeply appreciative and grateful for I-You Venture including the 2021 Ice Cream Day. “A heartfelt thank you for the generous portion of delicious ice cream with all the toppings, and cookies, provided to us. The residents had a fantastic time, and the weather was beautiful.

In addition, the residents and staff want to personally thank Nancy for support during the pandemic bringing in lovely handwritten cards with encouraging messages, and much more,” says Cynthia. “As we were met here at PCM with challenges during the outbreak, these gifts meant so much and brought smiles to many.”

The Holiday Helper program has been in place for over 30 years. Every December, volunteers generously purchase gifts for men and women; in 2021 these included slipper socks, shirts, lap blankets, scarves, stuffed animals, lotions, and calendars.

I-You Venture collects and gives these gifts to residents. Last year they distributed over 1,700 gifts to 1,000 care facility residents.

Nancy and everyone at I-You Venture are looking forward to a time, hopefully in the near future, where facilities are open to in-person visitors once again. “Visiting and talking with seniors is one of my great joys in life, and I love bringing a smile to their faces!”

It seems that Nancy’s positive attitude and friendliness, and the organization’s successful programs, have permeated our community. “Even before the pandemic, their support was important,” says Lynnette. “It is my belief that our senior citizens can use all the love and support they can get outside their own families and the facilities where they reside. I-You Venture provides connections with the local community and gives community members of all ages the opportunity to experience the joy of giving and caring for others—which I believe is one of the sources of true happiness. I cannot speak highly enough of this vital organization.”

If you’re interested in volunteering, I-You Venture can always use extra hands and hearts, even if you only have a little bit of time. For example, most people like to receive mail, so how about signing a few “Thinking of You” cards? This is a year-round opportunity; although they make sure to deliver cards and gifts during holidays, they also distribute cards each month to various facilities. To find out more, contact Nancy Cleveland at 831-459-8917, Ext 205 or [cleveland.n@fsa-cc.org](mailto:cleveland.n@fsa-cc.org)).

Also, the Santa Cruz Volunteer Center ([scvolunteercenter.org](http://scvolunteercenter.org)) often lists volunteer opportunities for I-You Venture and other worthwhile programs in our county.

Website: <https://fsa-cc.org/i-you-venture>

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