

## WellBeing

## GETTING BETTER WHILE GROWING OLDER

by Laurie Sanfilippo photograph by Bill West

"It's important that whatever you do in life, you have a passion for it. If you don't, then you're in the wrong business." This simple truth comes from Nicci Kobritz, who not only follows the passion in her own life, but also helps her clients renew their passion for life itself.

As president of Youthful Aging Home Health Inc., Nicci and her staff provide Sarasota/Manatee seniors with quality medical home healthcare. It does not, however, stop there. In addition to physical well being, Youthful Aging addresses the often overlooked companions of the bodily aging process – an idle mind and a declining spirit.

Case in point: the elderly client, a former artist, who lost her vision as she aged. Though distressing for anyone, it was especially difficult for someone who lived a life in which colors, shapes and imagery were not only part of her world, but part of who she was.

"She was a respected artist in her day, and losing her sight made her very depressed," Nicci says. "I was re-doing my office at the time, and asked her to paint a picture for me to hang in our new environment." At first the client was reluctant, but eventually embraced the challenge. The result? A lovely painting, plus the client's realization that her art was in her soul, not her sight.

Approaching each client as an individual, not as a demographic, is the foundation for the customized care process at Youthful Aging. And while fostering overall wellness by treating all facets of an individual is not a new concept (heard the term "holistic" lately?) it is rarely applied in senior care.

"The goal is for our clients to function with independence for as long as they can," says Nicci. "For some, that may just mean being able to get out of bed, get dressed and sit in a chair. For others, it may involve getting out of the house and back into the world, even just for the afternoon."

Case in point Number Two: the retired tomato grower whose malaise was intensifying the physical challenges of aging. Then an aide from Youthful Aging found the perfect form of therapy. "Every day at lunch, the healthcare worker would take him to a local tomato field where he could sit, eat lunch with the workers and talk tomatoes," Nicci says. "The affect on him, on his sense of well-being, was remarkable.

"Every one of our clients has a routine," Nicci continues. "We respect that and work without disrupting it."



During the familiarization process, Youthful Aging makes a close evaluation of clients' nutrition, mental acuity and mobility. The first step involves establishing a schedule of physical activity within the range of capabilities of each individual.

"Youthful Aging begins with a basic philosophy that all our home care clients, regardless of how infirm or disabled, can benefit from some form of exercise," Nicci says. The supervised activities are light but effective, designed to improve circulation, restore flexibility or increase strength and fitness.

"I may want them to have a personal trainer. If they have a beautiful pool, I may want the home health aide to take them into the pool and do some swimming exercises – or maybe they just get a good pair of shoes, and do a lot of walking or stretching. Judgment is required," Nicci adds. "We are talking about seniors who have been de-conditioned."

Case in point Number Three: the wheelchair-bound client who had all but given up on life. Youthful Aging got him into a pool twice a week for exercise, then into a part-time job rolling napkins at a senior friendship center. He now greets every morning with a new sense of purpose, showing the kind of progress that cannot be measured through blood work or X-rays.

After fitness needs are assessed, next comes a nutritional evaluation. Many of Youthful Aging's clients have

shown a renewed vigor after a proper diet has been restored.

"You'd be surprised how many people miss this simple answer," observes Nicci. In addition to diet and exercise, an increase in mental acuity can also make a marked difference in a client's well-being. If needed, Youthful Aging will work closely with neuropsychologists, physicians, and family members to create a program that can improve a client's memory, attention span, problem-solving skills and motor functions.

Case in point Number Four: the 68-year-old stroke victim, diagnosed with dementia. With the help of a neuropsychologist, Youthful Aging implemented an at-home program of mentally challenging games and cognitive exercises. Not only did this sharpen her mind, but also it gave her healthcare aide the opportunity to learn how she processes information.

"Now, we know how to communicate with her," Nicci explains, "and she communicates with us through gestures and short sentences. This is not a cure, but it helps."

If helping others is Nicci Kobritz's passion, than she certainly has found her niche. After graduating from State University of New York with a nursing degree in 1972, Nicci went to work for a community action program in Bangor, Maine. In 1975 she founded a pediatric clinic for low-income families – another passion that she cultivated for a dozen years. It was during that time of working

with young, indigent parents that Nicci learned how much more effective it was to focus on the environmental as well as the medical aspect of each case.

"It was an important part of treatment, to identify and accept the level that each mother was functioning from," Nicci adds, "and to give them support and information where it was needed." In 1987, Nicci went on to become cabinet commissioner for Maine's Community Services Department, before coming to Florida and joining the home health care field in 1992. As president of Youthful Aging Inc., Nicci reaches additional health-conscious seniors through her television show (also titled Youthful Aging), her information-driven Web site, and editorial columns.

For the 150 highly trained, stringently screened and vigorously assessed healthcare workers who help comprise Youthful Aging Inc., there is one job requirement that is not learned through formal education: compassion. "It is imperative that we meet the challenge of integrating professional care with nurturing, kindness and love at every level of our service. These qualities have become the soul of our business," Nicci says. "We give lots of hugs, and love to receive them too!"

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