

Shattering the Constraints of Aging

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By Matt Perry

As Fred Olson's body is wheeled out of AgeSong, the senior community's founder Nader Shabahangi is offered a basket with red and white flower petals. Shabahangi solemnly sprinkles the colorful petals on the white sheet that covers Olson's body.

When the San Francisco County medical examiner's van drives off, Shabahangi steps inside the brightly lit lobby of the Hayes Valley residence for an impromptu remembrance. As staff members hug residents, Olson's generosity and unique personality are recalled fondly – especially his pink wallet. A memorial service is scheduled two days later.

Shabahangi's eyes well up with tears, clearly affected by Olson's passing.

While other senior living communities may hide the reality of death from residents by shuttling a body quietly out a side door, Olson's passing codifies the AgeSong philosophy: Shatter current cultural attitudes about older adults by embracing every aspect of the aging process, including bodily decay and mental decline.

Essential behavior for all AgeSong staff: treat residents as society's wise elders – with respect and compassion.

One of the country's leaders in redefining aging, Shabahangi's rebel philosophy is filtered into six AgeSong Assisted Living and Elder Communities in San Francisco, Oakland, and neighboring Emeryville, which house nearly 400 residents. His approach actively counters today's constricted views on aging.

"Some of the most profound moments in my life are with those who are most forgetful," says Shabahangi. "You know what they forget? How society has told them the way they are supposed to be."

Where society sees liabilities, Shabahangi sees treasures. The advantages of aging, he says, are profound. They include many aspects younger generations desperately seek, but find elusive: slowing down, being in the moment, practicing forgiveness, and silencing the inner critic.

Staff members address residents directly and cheerfully, with a respect and dignity worlds apart from the human warehousing felt in other senior living communities.

"Everybody here has a heart, soul and mind," says Joann Bedard, who has lived at AgeSong for 15 years, and today mourns the death of her best friend Olson. "They know who we are. We're not just a number."

Bedard then looks to Shabahangi, AgeSong's CEO, and her smile grows wider: "He's such a beautiful man."

"AgeSong is about an attitude shift," says Shabahangi, a humanist psychologist who has written widely on aging issues. "We all care in a very deep way for our residents."

This core philosophy is supported by a holistic health approach focusing on wellness that integrates all aspects of a residents' life: mind, body and spirit.

Donna Schuck, 80, offers high praise for the staff members, who she calls unfailingly positive and polite.

"It's a calling," she says, "like being a monk."

Once living in a retirement hotel, Schuck's health declined and she was hospitalized for a heart condition before receiving rehabilitation. She could no longer return to her retirement hotel, and last year her three daughters began a search for the right facility.

"They just take such beautiful care of people there," says Schuck's daughter Mary Long. "It's so sweet. Touching really."

Schuck participates in music events and various art classes within the community's Expressive Arts and Arts Therapy programs.

"Because she is an artistic person, that was one of the selling points for us," says Long.

Still, for Long and her sisters, cost was also a factor, and the initial price tag was far outside the family budget. The daughters first decided to move Schuck into an institutional facility across town, when AgeSong administrators made the family a more affordable offer that nearly matched the competition. Long was thrilled.

Executive director Jim Johnson says AgeSong rooms range between \$3,500 – \$7,500 a month, the higher costs for targeted "forgetfulness care." Just over half of its residents live in shared rooms, the rest privately.

AgeSong also pairs residents one-on-one with devoted psychology students who use a "non-pathological" treatment model with residents.

"We have 45 interns spread throughout four of our communities who are completing requirements for advanced degrees as therapists or counselors," says Johnson. "This is a resource not available in any other assisted living communities in the U.S."

"The intern program is top-drawer," agrees Schuck. "They're all such lovely people."

But Shabahangi says that those who get the most from this collaboration aren't always the elder residents.

"This is truly an intergenerational program in that the real learning happens on the side of the youngsters," he says. "Just keeping a body healthy is such a myopic view of life."

Last fall, the AgeSong Institute sponsored the inaugural Poetics of Aging conference in San Francisco, a four-day event bringing together leaders in the field of aging to discuss the promises of aging, rather than the decay so often presented in American life.

Each of the event's four days was devoted to an aspect of aging, and included "The Poetics of Evolving Abilities" and "The Poetics of Caring."

Central to the conference were those presenters who keep older adults vibrant and engaged: musicians, poets, artists, storytellers, and movement experts such as yoga instructors.

Perhaps the highlight of the conference was Marion Rosen – a 97-year old Holocaust survivor who developed the Rosen Method of emotional release using massage and movement – who silenced the crowd with demonstrations on attendees.

Nearly 50 other organizations collaborated with AgeSong on the event.

AgeSong facilities provide the unmistakable sense of “home.” High ceilings, expansive windows that shower light, exposed wood, and triple-burned Tuscan tiles foster a resort atmosphere completely opposite from the carpeted, institutional living of most senior living communities.

Two of Shabahangi’s most radical approaches include weaning residents from psychotropic drugs that treat so-called “mental illness,” and to intermingle all residents within a single facility, even those suffering from dementia, Alzheimer’s, or paranoid schizophrenia.

He says medications merely mask the natural aging process; staff treat emotional outbursts as natural and acceptable behavior.

Marty Driscoll, a former psychologist suffering from the neurological disorder Huntington’s Disease, says AgeSong takes care of all his needs: physical, therapeutic, and spiritual. He especially likes its powerful sense of community.

“I love being here,” he says.

The AgeSong arts program allows residents “who no longer communicate in conventional ways” to creatively express themselves using poetry, painting, writing, music, poetry and the performing arts.

Shabahangi says that in many senior living communities older adults live in fear that when they become frail, lose cognitive skills, or become incontinent, they will quickly be shuttled to another location away from their friends.

“Once I diagnose you as being demented, everything being done to you will be seen through the eyes of dementia,” says Shabahangi. “Am I looking at you with eyes of love, or eyes of pathology?”

Born in Iran, educated at Stanford, and a former computer programmer, Shabahangi was eventually drawn to psychotherapy, and in the 1990s was asked to provide counseling services at a six-bed residential senior living home in San Francisco’s Outer Richmond district.

“I’m in absolute horror of what I see,” recalls Shabahangi. “I didn’t feel the elders relating to anyone there. The concept of ‘warehousing’ comes to mind.”

Shabahangi eventually became disenchanted with the role of traditional psychotherapists – he calls them “the social adjustment police” – and realized that both traditional psychotherapy and the treatment of older adults needed to change drastically.

All AgeSong communities are located in vibrant urban neighborhoods where older adults can eat, shop, and explore the greater community setting.

“There are very few places in the country where you have 80 or 90-year-olds integrated into the environment,” says Shabahangi.

AgeSong also operates its own publishing company as an outlet for aging voices rarely heard in mainstream media.

Today, Shabahangi's views have expanded brought him visitors from around the world, most recently Japan, a country heading towards an aging crisis and in desperate need of new ideas.

Johnson says he recently joined AgeSong because of Shabahangi's leadership in redefining the aging process.

"I've never worked for an organization with such a profound vision," he says.

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