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Virginia Mennonite Retirement Community

Intern or Field Placement Responsibilities/Opportunities

- help design and lead group activities in art, exercise, and other activities
- design activities that promote memory enhancement
- interview families and residents to learn about the resident's history and their likes/dislikes to help with program planning
- provide support and attention to residents who could benefit from someone to talk with
- assist the activities director in establishing a database for resident activities

Contact Information

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Read about students' experiences at this site below:



Spring 2019 – Ashley Oliver

The mission of Virginia Mennonite Retirement Community is to assist individuals in aging well and living fully. VMRC houses over 700 individuals ranging from independent and assisted living, all the way to complete living care. During my time at VMRC, I worked in the Complete Living Care unit located in Woodland Park which is a neighborhood on VMRC's campus. Woodland Park is comprised of eight individual houses, each housing approximately ten residents. The majority of residents in Woodland Park are there because they have some type of neurodegenerative disease such as dementia, Alzheimer's, or aphasia, or they have a physical disability that inhibits them from being able to live on their own. Within Woodland Park, I worked primarily in the Life Enrichment office which seeks to enrich the lives of residents through activities, events, social interactions, and ensuring residents always have optimal care.

I had a wide range of experiences and responsibilities at VMRC, for which I am grateful. This field placement allowed me to combine my two passions for ministry and psychology which resulted in a diverse and rich experience. One of my primary tasks was administering cognitive assessments which entailed asking residents various questions in order to assess their ability to comprehend and produce speech, as well as to test their vision and their hearing. One-on-one visits were also something that I did frequently. While some residents do have family and friends in the area who come visit them, many do not. Ensuring that residents still get the socialization that every human being needs is important in helping them feel loved and as though they are still people worthy of being known, despite whatever disease or disability landed them in CLC. In addition to cognitive assessments and one-on-one visits, I often helped lead crafts and activities in each house. There were also tasks to be carried out on the computer which were not as hands on, but nonetheless, tasks that needed to be completed. My supervisors encouraged more interaction with residents rather than being on the computer, so if I ever had just a few spare minutes, they would have me do charting, which simply entailed going into the system and entering residents' activity logs. I also had the joy of working alongside the chaplains during my time at VMRC. Because I am pursuing full-time ministry and made that known in my initial interview, I was able to help lead Bible every Tuesday morning, occasionally help lead Sunday worship, assist with remembrance services for residents who had passed away, and also do pastoral care visits with the chaplains. I consider myself so lucky to have had all of these experiences in just one short semester.

When you do field placement at VMRC, you should expect every day to be different, because it will be. After my first week of field placement, that was the impression I had. I used to see that as a disadvantage or a downfall, but I quickly grew to love the variability at VMRC and I truly cannot imagine working in an environment where each day is the same. I was definitely nervous going into my field placement, but on my very first day, I was met by the most wonderful staff who were kind, patient, and incredibly fun to work with. In addition to the staff, the residents are some of the most thoughtful, sweet, and loving people I have ever met. I can so easily say that knowing them has made my life richer than anything I could have possibly done for them during my time in field placement. A huge advantage to doing field placement at VMRC is the people you will encounter. The biggest challenge I had throughout this placement



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was communicating with the residents. As first I felt as though I would fail in this placement because I felt incapable of being effective in communicating, but as I got to know the residents, built rapport with them, and also did research on the topic of communication, I learned the best forms of communicating with each individual, based on their cognitive state.

I learned so much at my site that narrowing it down to just one thing is an impossible task. There is a learning curve at this placement but that curve does not stop, because you are constantly learning the entire time you are there. I learned different communication skills that do not necessarily entail verbally speaking which allowed me to build more relationships with residents. I also learned or was reminded of the importance of self-care. Given the elderly population that you work with at this field placement, death is going to happen, and when it does, it can get heavy and be emotionally exhausting. It is important to have your outlets, to let yourself feel all of the feelings, and to process them healthily. One of the biggest lessons I learned at this field placement and working with this population was the power of presence. Simply sitting with a resident, holding their hand, watching T.V with them, or reading to them is meaningful. Though some of the residents cannot communicate verbally or understand what you are saying, they still have feelings and the basic human desire for contact and interaction. Silence can often be uncomfortable for people including myself at times, and that silence is often sought to be filled with words, but sometimes words are not as powerful as a presence.

I went into this field placement knowing I loved psychology and ministry but was confused as to how I could use both. Now, at the end of my field placement, I have a better understanding of how the two go together in more ways than one. So much of pastoral ministry involves being present with people as they go through crises, and working with the chaplains at VMRC helped me realize how much I adore the sacredness of being with people and their family members in those crises, as they near the end of their life or cope with sickness. It was in those moments that I was able to apply lessons that I have learned in classes at JMU, such as abnormal psych, counseling psych, and thanatology.

The biggest nugget of advice I would give to anyone who pursues this field placement site is to pour yourself into it, because you get out of the experience what you put into it. I remember being told those very words at the start of my field placement, and it remains true today. Also do not be afraid to get attached to residents. The relationships you build and every moment you are willing to spend with them is valuable. Five residents I knew and had developed relationships with passed away during the semester I was in field placement at VMRC, and it does make you want to put up barriers for fear of having to face another loss. But my advice? Do not. Give all that you have to offer to this site and to these residents, and they will give you back so much more.

Spring 2019 – Kaitlyn Bridgeforth

This semester, I completed my field placement at Virginia Mennonite Retirement Community. At VMRC, “We strive to be a community of hope, meaning and growth where people can age well and live fully.” They value meaningful engagement, community involvement, creating a supportive and caring environment, and providing activity opportunities for residents, guests, staff, and the local community. VMRC serves roughly 700 residents



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through independent living, assisted living, and complete care living areas. Woodland Park, where I spent the majority of my time, is home to around 80 residents in eight houses. This is a complete care living area, so those who live here have 24/7 assistance available. I had the privilege of working with the Life Enrichment Team in Woodland Park, and their purpose is to enrich the lives of residents through activities, events, and other forms of meaningful engagement. Their goal is not only to meet the needs of the residents, but the wants of the residents as well.

One of the ways we achieve this is by conducting cognitive assessments. This was one of my main responsibilities for both Woodland Park and Transitional Care, a rehabilitation area for seniors transitioning from the hospital to home. The length of the assessment varied by how recently the resident had their last assessment done (if at all). For every resident, I would perform basic evaluations of their vision, hearing, speech, and cognitive functioning. New residents and residents who have not had a full assessment done in a while go through the entire process. This included an additional portion that referenced their interests, hobbies, and preferences. For example, I would ask, “How important is it for you to keep up with the news?” or “How important is it for you to have family members or close friends involved in discussion about your care?” The responses that are provided help the staff and caregivers form specialized plans that are catered towards the individual.

Another one of my responsibilities was to help with activities and events. Sometimes this would entail pushing residents in wheelchairs to and from an event or assisting with the facilitation of an activity. Every Monday morning, there was a “Fun and Fitness” activity that I would bring the Woodland Park residents to. There, everyone would form a circle and do exercises that would help them with their motor skills. Sometimes I would sit, talk, and participate with the residents, but I would often help the facilitator as well. Some of these exercises included catching and throwing a beach ball, doing arm and leg stretches, and passing cones of different colors around and saying each color out loud. However, a lot of the activities I helped with would be spontaneous rather than something that was regularly scheduled. There were many days I would arrive to VMRC and would be informed of a craft or game that was going to be happening at one of the houses, and I would be asked to go there and facilitate. I have helped with making sugar scrubs, playing ring toss, and bowling, to name a few. There are plenty of options for the residents and staff to choose from.

Since there are eight different houses in Woodland Park, there are also eight different schedules for them. While there are some events that all residents are welcome to come to, there are also activities that are specific to each home. I had the responsibility of making their weekly calendars. I would list the dates, times, and names of each activity or event, as well as descriptions. I started to have a lot of fun with making these by adding puns or rhymes in the descriptions. Staff also kept track of all of the significant daily activities for each residents in their houses, regardless of if activities were done independently or in groups, and would send in the written copies of this information to Life Enrichment. Another one of my responsibilities was to chart these in an online database.

After my field placement was over halfway complete, I was trained to accompany residents to medical appointments in the community. This is something I wish I had done a lot sooner since my long-term goal is to practice medicine, specifically psychiatry. My first appointment involved going to Sentara RMH, where I spent time talking with the resident about



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their medical and personal concerns and attended the meeting with their provider. My intended role was to make sure the resident could get from place to place in their wheelchair and provide any necessary paperwork, but one of the most important aspects of that experience was simply being fully present in the moment. I think this is a major takeaway from being an intern at VMRC altogether.

Being part of the Life Enrichment Team means being a part of the lives of residents in a meaningful way. This comes down to the time you spend with residents day in and day out, getting to know them as a person above all else. Easily, my number one responsibility at VMRC was to spend time with the residents in one form or another. Learning their names, their likes and dislikes, and how they spend their time are the first steps to making positive contributions to their lives.

I chose VMRC as my placement because of my previous work experience in the behavioral health unit of a hospital. I thoroughly enjoyed working with patients that were older in age. They had a lot of interesting thoughts and perspectives on life and were such a unique group of people to spend time with. I knew I wanted to go into psychiatry, but I started considering specializing in this population. After my placement at VMRC, I still don't know for sure if that's what I'd like to do. I think only time will tell, but VMRC has certainly helped me reflect more deeply about my decisions in this regard.

Overall, I think VMRC is a fantastic site for field placement if you are looking for variety. A lot of days can be very fast-paced, where you're on your feet most of the time, pushing wheelchairs, and rushing from building to building. Other days you may be in the office the entire time. Either of these can be an advantage or disadvantage depending on your preferences, and VMRC can definitely be conducive to branching out. You may step out of your comfort zone, visit residents you've never met, or learn to communicate differently with some residents. It's also not uncommon for residents to pass away suddenly, and you may find yourself grieving that loss as well. Whatever the situation though, you have a support system in your supervisors at VMRC. When it comes to field placements, I think I lucked out quite a bit. Not only did I make wonderful connections with many of the residents, so much so that I plan to continue volunteering at VMRC after graduation, but I also formed friendships with the people I worked with. I've shared so many genuine laughs and great conversations with the Life Enrichment Team, and it just adds to what makes this placement so special. I believe I've grown both professionally and personally as a result of my field placement at Virginia Mennonite Retirement Community.

Fall 2018 – Anh Doan

VMRC mission is “age well, live fully”. It is a retirement community that offers service for a large age range in the senior community, from independent living to complete living care. Residents in independent living areas have the options of different types of apartments and cottages. For those who are seeking for complete living care, they live in housing studios with other residents. They have 24/7 on-site staff to support their needs such as bathing, getting in and out of their wheelchair, and preparing meals for them. Beside housing, VMRC also offer service



for residents that cannot travel outside of campus such as church, pool, exercise room, physical therapy, salon, cafe, grocery store, etc.

At VMRC, I'm currently working with the people at Life Enrichment Program. Our task is to provide the residents in Woodland Park area with social support to enrich their lives. Woodland Park area is a complete living care area, with residents with physical or cognitive disabilities. They are in the age range of 80s to 100s years old. In our program, we would plan monthly events for the residents to attend. This can be a collective event such as music concert, Sunday service, or occasionally, a seasonal fair. We also have smaller scale events for different houses in Woodland Park such as crafting events, exercise events. We also do one on one visits. Our priority is to visit those that get few to no visits but we also try our best to see everyone each month.

My favorite task in VMRC is the one on one visits. The conversation is very meaningful for me and the person that I talk to. This helped me learn how to communicate with people with cognitive impairment. It helped me learn to speak in a way that they can comprehend. On top of that, I also learned to be more patient, more understanding toward people. To many residents, they are facing a lot of frustrations that an able-body person like me might not have. They forget things. Everything hurts for them when the weather gets colder. They can't do a lot of things that they were able to do when they were younger. For a psychologist, I think it is very important to be able to ask the question of "what put you in a bad mood today?" rather than just assume that it is just how they are. I also really enjoy bringing residents to music concerts. To many residents with severe dementia, it is very hard to communicate with them. Some seem to be shut-in in their own world. Yet, if I bring them to music concert, some will actually sing along to the lyrics. My least favorite thing to do have to be the activities. I don't dislike them as most residents seem to enjoy them. However, some houses do not like activities too much that sometimes it feels like we are just forcing them to do so.

The one thing I did not realize until I begin working at VMRC is the difference in physical and mental function in the age range of the senior population. We tend to lump them up together but seniors in their 60s and 70s are very different from seniors in their 80s and 90s. People in their 60s and 70s are generally more independent and have better functioning cognitively. This grants them the freedom to move around and visit other people and places. Many residents in the 60s and 70s also volunteer for different programs in VMRC. However, by the time people hit 80s or 90s, things can be very different. Most of them are less functional physically and mentally. They do not get to go out as often. Many residents by this age are housebound. Their social circle also shrinks as friends around their age are also facing the same problems. Because of this, many residents often feel lonely, sitting in their room all day, waiting for a visit from people. This is the reason why I enjoy one on one visits so much. I often like to visit residents that do not get a lot of visitors or those that volunteers might not want to visit as much. This makes me want to do more research on the elderly generation and bring awareness to the topic.

I got the idea for my contribution project from my encounters with residents, crying or yelling for help, some from genuine fear because of their dementia, and some to get attention. I used to always feel so confused when that happened. I wanted to help but I did not know what to do. Finally, I decided to do more research on what is the best thing to do in those situations and the contribution project was a great opportunity for me to do so. With this, I was able to react more



effectively when I encountered similar situations. I hope my research will also help future volunteers if they encounter such events.

Last but not least, for those who are not sure of what they might want to do for their internship, I do highly recommend them to give VMRC a try. For students in the psychology major, this is a good opportunity to gain the skill and experience in communicating with people with cognitive disabilities. Also, most of us know that the elderly population is the one with the highest suicide rate, yet, I do not think that we have done enough for them as many are tucked away inside their own home or institutional settings. I think this field placement is very helpful in understanding more about this generation, the struggles that they have to go through and maybe why they have the highest suicide rate. I'm very grateful for the experience I have gained while working at VMRC. I'm also thankful for the help and support I have received from my supervisor, staff and co-volunteers.

Spring 2017 – Angela Cangialosi

I completed the field placement program at the Virginia Mennonite Retirement Community. Their mission was to help the aging population to age well in a place they call home. VMRC offered many services to residents there. The Life Enrichment Team specifically focused on creating a monthly calendar of activities that residents could volunteer to attend if they were interested. Essentially, the service was meant to allow for psychological, emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical wellbeing. The site offered assisted living care, complete living care and transitional care services to its customers. The site offered a doctor's office, cafeteria, convenience store, and fitness center.

Most of my experience dealt with complete living care residents. This meant that the residents were being cared for primarily and totally by nursing staff. I was able to see a more insider perspective on the retirement community atmosphere. I interacted with the residents to the best of my ability. My experience was fairly split between interacting with residents in a group setting and an individual setting. One on ones were a bigger responsibility of mine, wherein I would visit residents who were not visited frequently to give them social stimulation and generally someone to keep them company. I would have the chance to ask them about how they were doing, learn about their interests and past experiences. I was also able to sit in on transitional care plan meetings.

When I was walked through the site and taken through orientation, I had very high expectations for the site. I thought that the environment was very lively and inviting. I think VMRC does a good job of keeping the site familiar for residents in terms of decor and it served to make residents feel at home. Many of the staff are young and this is to the residents' advantage. The staff have many creative ideas for ways to engage residents and bring lively energy to the site that residents expressed they appreciated. Some disadvantages at the site would be that despite residents being appreciative, there were few residents who I worked with that would attend events. At times I felt that the creativity of the staff working with complete living care was not being taken advantage of by the residents. Another downside to the job was that there were many different teams operating at the site. VMRC has the Life Enrichment team, nursing team, social work team, rehabilitation team, etc. It was difficult to get a good grasp on the entire system and how each team worked together, which would have made me appreciate



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the experience more. Although I enjoyed my field placement experience, I do not think that I would choose to work in a retirement community or with the older population. Working at this site made me realize - in relation to working with the Life Enrichment Team specifically - that I thrive in a fast paced environment. I enjoy having a lot to do and I often found myself having to really seek out tasks to keep myself busy. There was only so much that I was really able to do with the qualifications I had and the type of residents that I was assigned to. However, I loved being able to interact with the residents that I worked with. They were all incredible people and I enjoyed listening and asking them about their lives. Many of them had rich histories and life experiences. It was rewarding to see them engaged in conversation and wanting to tell their stories.

Something that I took away from working at VMRC was that actively listening and being curious can make a tremendous difference in your interactions with anyone. Many of the residents have problems with memory and recall. Often times I would find myself in situations where residents would tell me the same things they told me in past conversations word for word. I was able to learn that the older population is not as off-putting as people might think that they are. The older population, in this community specifically, was incredibly welcoming and down to earth. These residents were normal people like myself or anyone else and their age was not necessarily something that defined them or their personality. I think this field placement program taught me to come in to new experiences with no preconceived notions about others. By simply listening and asking questions thoughtfully, you can make experiences meaningful for all parties involved. Some interactions were harder to initiate than others, especially if residents were hard of hearing or nonverbal. I was able to practice patience in these situations, which I think is an incredibly valuable skill. Patience came into play when residents were hard of hearing, nonverbal, or had memory recall issues. With memory recall, patience was needed to listen to the same information on multiple occasions. It was also necessary when waiting for residents to respond to questions. Often times, it would take more time for them to respond to me or for them to make decisions about activities, for example. It was important to allow them to take the time they needed to respond and decide on things because autonomy was something they valued. There were times where I had to repeat questions several times for residents who were hard of hearing. Just being patient and understanding helped in this case.

Because my role did not come with tasks that kept me busy throughout the entire experience, it was important for me to seek opportunities to stay busy and productive. In prior job experiences, I found that there were always tasks to be completed so this gave me the ability to practice taking initiative in the work setting. After the first week, it was easy to get a grasp on the routine and structure of the job.

Ultimately, I feel that working with children is where I excel and feel most fulfilled. I would love to continue to volunteer with the older population. What I learned and refined through my experience at VMRC can be applied to any career path I follow. Communication, patience, active listening and curiosity can be useful in any position.