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Making connections: AstraZeneca's ElderBuddy Program

Lou Ryan, who works in AstraZeneca's Technical Services group supporting Research & Development, visits his ElderBuddy Sam four times a month. That works out to more than 150 visits since the ElderBuddy program began in spring 2003. Of course, it's not quantity that matters — it's quality. And improving the quality of life for seniors living in senior housing communities in Wilmington is what the ElderBuddy program is all about.

“There's a real need for a program like ElderBuddy,” Ryan says. “Living in a nursing home can be monotonous, and a visit from someone on the ‘outside’ interrupts what I believe is some of that monotony.”

The ElderBuddy program matches AstraZeneca employee and retiree volunteers — a group known inside the company as AstraZeneca Ambassadors — with elderly people in need of companionship. Through ElderBuddy, Ambassadors provide regular visits to older adults living in nonprofit senior housing, assisted-living or long-term care facilities. They also embody the true meaning of Patient Health First by enhancing the quality of life for one of the fastest-growing segments of the U.S. population.

A study from scientists at the University of Chicago, published in March 2006 in the journal *Psychology and Aging*, found that loneliness is a major risk factor in increasing blood pressure in older Americans, and could increase the risk of death from stroke and heart disease. According to the study authors, improvements in a sense of social connectedness may have clinical benefits comparable to lifestyle modifications, such as weight loss or exercise to reduce hypertension. The results are so compelling that the National Institute on Aging has set a goal to help determine what can be done to improve the quality of relationships and social connectedness as a way to ease loneliness among older adults.

Today, ElderBuddy maintains more than 30 volunteers, who visit “buddies” at three participating nonprofit facilities: Gilpin Hall, Luther Towers and Ingleside Retirement Apartments.

Irene Fick conceived of ElderBuddy in 2002 as a way to address two growing trends. “At AstraZeneca,” Fick explains, “the Ambassadors program was just coming together as an organized corporate initiative supported by AstraZeneca leadership. At the same time, the area was seeing a rapid growth of seniors living in residential facilities. It seemed like such a logical solution to match our Ambassadors one-on-one with local seniors.”

To bring the idea into reality, Fick turned to The Family and Workplace Connection (FWC), a nonprofit agency that began in 1986 as a childcare information and referral service and evolved over time to include eldercare solutions. As FWC expanded its services, corporations came to the organization to develop programs that allow employees to more effectively balance work and life.

“Irene Fick knew of us and came to us with the idea,” says Kathy Hyde, ElderCare Services Director at FWC. “She needed an agency with experience and expertise working with local seniors to bring her vision of ElderBuddy to life. We then developed program guidelines, interviewed volunteers and seniors, and matched people with similar interests.

Many of the original pairings are still going strong. According to Hyde, who also manages ElderBuddy for AstraZeneca, great pains are taken to ensure quality matches. “We maintain regular contact with both the seniors and volunteers to make sure everything is going smoothly. If any issues or challenges arise, the on-site coordinators contact me.”

Laura King, who works in Corporate Affairs on the Corporate External Communications team, has been an ElderBuddy for only a few months. “I looked forward to developing a one-on-one relationship with a senior citizen through ElderBuddy. However, when I signed up for the program, I was presented the opportunity to pair with a lady who is 50 but suffers from

multiple sclerosis and is bed-ridden. I was worried. She is my mom's age — isn't that going to make me sad every time I visit? What will I talk about, especially knowing her condition?"

As it turned out, King and her elder companion have discovered much to talk about, from favorite TV shows to the secrets of a successful marriage to the best chocolate milk on the East Coast. But it does prove the point that there is no such thing as a "standard" ElderBuddy experience.

For the older adults who participate in ElderBuddy, there is much to be gained from the shared desire of AstraZeneca volunteers to give back to the community. Most value the attention that comes from a one-on-one visit from someone who is outside the borders of their particular facility.

"It's nice for seniors to have someone who comes and visits just them," Hyde says. "It makes them feel special. It makes them feel connected to the outside world."

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