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College students change dementia patients' lives

By Lin Sue Flood, Tribune Guest Writer

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Buhari Abdulai, right, sits with Hospice of the Valley patient Bill Harris and Harris' grandson David. *(Special to the Tribune)*

A Mesa Community College foreign exchange student discovered the perfect way to feel at home in a new city.

Buhari Abdulai signed up for the College Partners Program offered by Hospice of the Valley. The innovative program matches college students with older adults living with dementia.

“I found the vision of hospice so intriguing, and I wanted to be part of a great team that provides beautiful care to people living with dementia. There is nothing like that in my country,” the 24-year-old Ghana native said.

For the next seven months, Buhari offered socialization and companionship to 80-year-old Bill Harris and his family, who live in Tempe.

“Buhari became a part of our extended family,” said Bill’s wife, Myra. “For two semesters, he faithfully visited on a weekly basis and his visits were eagerly anticipated by all of us.

“Buhari brought laughter and joy into our home. He conversed with my husband, sampled new foods with us and even allowed my grandson David to introduce him to red licorice. He played games with our grandson and graciously joined us for David’s sixth birthday party — it just made his day!”

Buhari and other College Partners volunteers say they are grateful for the chance to make a difference in people’s lives.

They are exposed to hands-on, real-life, career-defining experiences that have a lasting impact.

Arya Yadav said volunteering taught her how to appreciate the small things in life that we often miss and celebrate “the joy of living in the moment and relishing it as a sweet memory later.”

Danielle Cooper utilized the magic of music to make meaningful connections with her person with dementia. “She loved ‘70s music and was able to sing every word of every song.”

Mariah Meza Perez was paired with a former nurse practitioner who shared “brave, wild and inspiring” stories from her career — and inspired her to pursue the same profession.

One of her fondest memories was taking strolls together and sharing their gratitude for each other at the end of every visit.

Hospice of the Valley and its Supportive Care for Dementia program launched this unique student volunteer program in 2021 with a grant from the national Community Care Corps.

The goal is to enhance quality of life for people living with early and moderate stages of dementia, and also to reduce caregiver burden.

In exchange for their generous gift of time, students receive incentives like scholarship opportunities, monthly education with dementia experts and a dementia training certificate.

“The knowledge I’ve gained has sparked a passion inside me as a future healthcare provider,” said Ali Kindred.

As a College Partners volunteer, she provided companionship by watching westerns and making milkshakes, allowing a family member to take a much-needed break from caregiving.

Now that Buhari is back in Ghana, he is determined to advocate for people living with dementia.

“After learning about the complexities of this disease, I realize there may be people who have been misdiagnosed as mentally ill,” he said.

“I plan to educate families in my community to seek medical care and obtain accurate diagnoses. People living with dementia are not mentally ill, but they do require optimal care, love and support.”

To apply for the College Partners Program: contact Holly Cottor at hcottor@hov.org or 602-515-6207. Information: hov.org/volunteer/college-partners-program

Lin Sue Flood is director of Community Engagement at Hospice of the Valley.