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Architect learns nursing home ropes

By Dan Aceto

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It's been more than nine days since Evan Carrol sustained a stroke that left him completely paralyzed on the left side of his body.

Diagnosed with congestive heart failure, he lost the ability to walk, eat solid foods or bathe himself and was admitted to the Maine Veterans' Home in Scarborough for constant care and supervision.

Although his condition has since been upgraded to stable, his injuries are anything but life threatening: they're voluntary.

Carroll, 29, is a Portland architect participating in a simulated exercise to better understand the needs of handicapped patients when designing a nursing home. The Learning by Living program was developed in 2005 by Dr. Marilyn Gugliucci of the University of New England to allow medical students the opportunity to experience firsthand the life of a handicapped individual in a nursing home setting.

Since its inception, approximately 28 students have volunteered to spend two weeks or more during summer living in a nursing home.

Carroll may be perfectly healthy, but his condition was designed to be as realistic as possible. Confined to a wheelchair for the majority of his stay, he was forced to live at the beck and call of nurses, eat pureed food and required assistance to get to the bathroom.

"It's been really humbling to ask for help all the time, for things that you really want to be able to do on your own, like cleaning yourself, going to bathroom or getting up in morning. That was the most challenging for sure. Essentially it's like being a 1- or 2-year-old again," Carroll said.

Getting acclimated to his surroundings and the people who work at the nursing home was one of the first difficulties, Carroll said.

"When I first started I didn't know any staff and I was expected to not act like myself, which is essentially what happens to residents, so emotionally you begin to feel pretty insecure," he said. "And then just when you start to get to know everyone there is a shift change, which I imagine also is probably tough on residents when they first come."

Carroll, who is principal architect at Bild Architecture in Portland, said he has always had an interest in projects that benefit the needs of others. He has been involved in several residential projects related to improving the life of the elderly, such as constructing walkways and ramps to homes.

Carroll said he became interested in the architecture and design of nursing homes when he attended the Maine Geriatrics Conference this year hosted by Gugliucci during a lull in his work.

"When Evan told me he was an architect, my first question was, 'what are you doing at a geriatric conference?'" Gugliucci said. "Then he told me, 'well I'm really interested in designing a living

environment,' and I go, 'if you really want to learn, would you consider living the life of an older adult resident in nursing home?' Then he kind of stared and said 'yes that'd be good.'"

For Gugliucci, the program is more than educating others on the lives of handicapped seniors, it's about creating connections between students and residents.

"What this project really is about is human connection," Gugliucci said. "It's about walking in the shoes or wheeling in the chair of an older adult and I think that's the best way to learn about their lives."

Gugliucci said she has since become interested in pursuing funding to make the program a national project for students and interested participants. To date, all nursing homes that participate in the program have provided a room and meals for students for free.

Nora Holliday, director of nursing at Maine Veterans' Home, said the experience has been beneficial for students and staff.

"The medical students have expressed that the experience has been life changing," Holliday said. "Staying in a nursing home, as far as their outlook and career in medicine, has unanimously been an invaluable experience. I think a lot of medical students gained a deeper appreciation for how hard the staff works and how many form a bond and really care about residents take care of."

In his downtime, which is limited due to the amount of effort needed to eat three meals a day (approximately six hours), Carroll said he has been speaking with staff and residents, exercising, participating in sing-a-longs and doing other group activities, all the while taking notes on potential improvements to nursing home life. Many of those ideas center around creating an environment that instills a greater sense of "home" amongst residents, he said.

"There weren't many things that jumped out at me as being huge problems right away," Carroll said. "So I started thinking about how it feels being here over time and when you start thinking like that one of the first things you realize is that it doesn't feel like a home, it's more institutional."

From an architectural standpoint, Carroll said one of the first improvements he would make is to incorporate a setting with a kitchen as a center to keep residents more in touch with their senses and surroundings.

"When you think of the things that help a place feel like home, there are sounds and smells and all sorts of other things," he said. "Part of everyone's vision of home is smelling cookies baking and the fact that the kitchen is removed is something that makes it more institutional."

One of the improvements Carroll said he would consider is dividing a nursing home into 10-unit sections organized around one common area that includes a kitchen for residents maintained by staff.

Other suggestions are to incorporate a buffet-style dining room where residents in wheelchairs are able to choose foods while rolling on a conveyor belt, Carroll said.

Aside from the culinary aspect, Carroll said smaller ideas, such as personalizing room doors with sentimental items, also helps create a sense of ownership.

While many of the suggestions may benefit residents, Carroll said he realizes budget constraints limit a developer's options.

"I think the two competing issues are efficiency, where you're driven by how much it costs to run a nursing home, and making it look like a home," Carroll said.

In addition to nursing homes, Carroll said he also is interested in providing other options for assisted living such as co-housing apartment complexes. Those complexes would function on the premise of having multi-generational residents who are able to help with tasks such as lifting groceries for neighbors in need, he said.

"I think one of things we need to get better at is giving people alternatives to be independent," Carroll said.

Although Carroll has been taking notes on improvements, there were many things he said he was impressed by, such as hallways wide enough for two wheelchairs, bigger doorframes and adjustable beds.

"A lot of things worked out pretty well here," Carroll said.

Carroll said he was impressed with the layout of Maine Veterans' Home. Being confined to a wheelchair allowed him to make other observations about life as a handicapped individual.

"One of the things I've been thinking about a lot is that ramps don't always work," Carroll said. "It's extraordinarily hard to control yourself going up unless you're in an electric chair and that isn't something I would have known had I not been in a wheelchair."

Carroll said he thinks residents also want additional privacy.

"That is a direction the industry is moving in, which is a fairly big thing, being able to feel like you are your own person in your own room," Carroll said.

Carroll does not have a specific project lined up, but he said he would like to begin work on a nursing home sometime in the next two to three years. He said his experience at Maine Veterans' Home has been invaluable in teaching him the fundamentals of what is needed in a functioning nursing home.

"I'm extraordinarily happy with how things went," Carroll said. "This has really framed my understanding of nursing home facilities and I have no question about the day-to-day activities and what is required to take care of a person, which is what these places are all about, taking care of someone. It's been really inspiring to see how well people work here. An architect has a helping hand, but in the end it comes down to staff, whether it's a good place to live or a bad place to live, and they do a great job here."

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