When Household Coordinator Jean Sandberg talks about her household at Episcopal Church Home in St Paul, MN, it is easy to lose track of how many times she says, “know the resident.” It is the foundation on which they have built home and a sense of family in Isabella House.

Throughout the organization, when a resident comes to live in a household, after their assessment, the household coordinator, with the resident’s permission, puts together information from the assessment into a book titled “What’s Important to Me.” These books help staff get to know the resident as a person. Then a learning circle is held in the household with residents and staff to introduce and welcome the new person. Right from the start, everyone is encouraged to get to know their new housemate.

Jean has also developed Resident Bingo games for staff to help them engage residents and know more about them. “In the beginning, it was information that they could get from their chart. Things like, ‘Who was born in Illinois?’” But then she dug deeper to make it more of a challenge. She talked to residents and their families and included information that would really require conversation such as how someone met her husband. After getting game sheets at a staff meeting, staff spent the week engaging residents to complete the game.

It is also important for residents to get to know each other. Residents in Isabella House put together two-sided “scrapbook” pages of pictures of themselves and the people and things that are important to them. These laminated pages sit on the household dining tables with the salt and pepper shakers an can be used by anyone to help strike up mealtime conversation among tablemates. Not only does this help folks get to know each other, it helps make meal times more interesting.

Most Isabella House residents are living with dementia. Jean said knowing things about residents is particularly helpful in guiding them through difficult situations. For example, when assisting someone to the bathroom, Jean said, knowing that that person grew up on a farm and used to go to an outhouse can be useful in understanding where they may be at and in negotiating with them.

The folks at Isabella House know that getting to know someone can and should happen in many different ways. They have made it a way of life in the household by looking for opportunities to make connections with each other throughout the day. When everyone really knows each other in special ways, life in the household feels so much more natural. It feels like home.
Here’s a simple question: Does someone come into your house and decorate it for the holidays? With the business of the season we may sometimes wish someone would, but for most of us, pulling the decorations out of the attic or basement and out of their rubber tubs and tissue paper is the start of holiday traditions. There are heirlooms, things the kids made, some gaudy knick-knack that we’ve become attached to and some novelty song-playing piece that makes us laugh and makes someone in the family roll their eyes. Let’s not forget the special plate for Christmas cookies. There’s frustration with the strings of lights, hot cocoa and hot toddies, Christmas songs on the radio, and most importantly, time with our family. Why should elders in nursing homes miss out on all that?

Traditional nursing home Christmas decorations often include one big tree put up by volunteers and something like a wall of construction paper stockings with residents’ names on them like you would see in a grammar school. But, it’s been a joy to see the decorations in recently visited households, chosen and put up by residents and staff. At Episcopal Church Home in St Paul, MN, staff took interested residents down to the basement to retrieve decorations. Many households ask for donations of decorations or go on an outing to thrift stores to find holiday treasures. Each house is decorated differently, and residents give direction about what should go where and oversee their favorite pieces. As with most things, it is actually the experience around the decorations that is as important, if not more so, than the decorations themselves.

A family member of a resident from Shorehaven in Oconomowoc, WI (http://lho.org/) has been putting together scrapbook pages of pictures of her dad and his experiences in his household there. She put together this lovely page about decorating for Christmas with photos of her dad decorating his household at Shorehaven. It’s exciting to think of not just passing Christmas in a nursing home, but of making holiday memories and new traditions.

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