



# Finding Love and Joy in Assisted Living

By Janice Martin, Senior Advisor / Family Liaison

When most people think about assisted living, they have a preconceived idea of what it's like. If they've never been to a community or haven't visited in many years, they would most likely describe it as one of several ways: 1) it's heaven's waiting room; 2) people sit around slumped over in wheel chairs; 3) there's nothing going on, and 4) people have no independence. Often, people visit for the first time expecting this, therefore it's what they see.

However, there is a very different side that is rarely considered. Assisted living can be a place where people find joy. Where they find new friends and learn new things. They have apartments decorated with their favorite things, go on trips, learn new games, and have celebrations. And sometimes, it's where they find love again.

After years sitting alone in their homes clinging to what has become familiar with all their might and isolated from the rest of the world, they blossom when introduced to good nutrition, socialization, and laughter. It's nearly impossible to imagine that there can be joy again. They may have spent decades married to someone they loved and are now widowed. They are alone and may not have experienced the sensation of a tender touch or a gentle kiss in a very long time. They believe this is what is left for them for the rest of their lives.

I'd like to share with you that it can be different. That unexpected possibilities can present themselves by simply taking a chance. By believing that outside the walls of the home that now contains loneliness and memories of happier times, there can be a new life with wonderful opportunities. Sometimes it's necessary to change your perspective and attitude. If you expect to be lonely surrounded by "old people" who do nothing after moving to assisted living, that is most likely what you will find. If you want to be miserable, trust me – you will be. Remember the saying, "Fake it 'til you make it"? It's true. If others see you as friendly and open to something new, they will be drawn to you.

One of the most uplifting things I have witnessed is when two residents meet at a community and fall in love. To watch them walk together or sit side by side holding hands and connect so sweetly with one another is heartwarming. To see that special twinkle

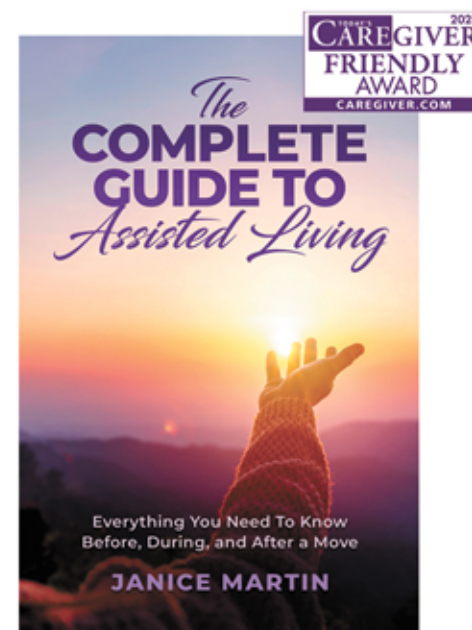


While working at an assisted living community in The Villages a few years ago, preparing for a wedding for two of our residents was a highlight of my time there. The bride had a wonderful time picking out the perfect dress, deciding on the food, music, and cake, and being the center of the excitement of the residents and staff. They were married in the afternoon in the lobby that was romantically decorated. The music of Pachelbel's Canon filled the air and fresh flowers were abundant. The cake was lovingly made by a staff member and champagne flowed for everyone. The ceremony was performed by a resident who was a retired pastor, and friends and family came from far and wide to share their joy. After the festivities the happy couple, both in their 80's, left in the groom's car to enjoy a honeymoon cruise to the Caribbean!

Recently, another happy couple were married at Vista Lake Assisted Living in Leesburg. Coral DiMaggio, the executive director, worked with her staff to plan the happy event and she had the honor of giving the bride away. Coral's son Gabriel was asked to be the ring bearer. The bride has lived in the

community for a year and the groom moved in shortly after. The new husband and wife, both in their 70s, knew within days it was love! The bride let it be known that she wanted a Hawaiian wedding at her assisted living home surrounded by her friends, her daughter, and the staff who help provide care each day. A sign proclaiming "You had me at Aloha" hung on the mantle before them and the ceremony was performed by the pastor who visits the community weekly. Coral had his-and-her handmade leis shipped from Hawaii as a very special touch and the bride sang her vows to her loving groom.

Is this how you envision assisted living? It doesn't matter if you're 19 or 90 and beyond, love is possible. There is joy and hope. I invite you to visit an assisted living community with fresh eyes and imagine the unexpected. Leave your preconceived ideas and fears at the door and cross the threshold to a new chapter in life with a positive and open heart.



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