



ENJOYING THE HOLIDAYS IN ASSISTED LIVING

By Janice Martin, owner of Senior Liaison of Central Florida Inc.

Making the decision to move to assisted living is difficult. There is no denying it's life changing. One of the questions I frequently hear is, "when will I know it's time?" Although you may know in your heart that the time has come, there is still reluctance to take that next step.

Conversations will have a similar pattern. In April, they may have made the decision to move forward but resist scheduling a date. "Dad's birthday is in May. Let's wait until after his birthday." In June, "His grandson is graduating and he really wants to go. Let's wait until he gets back" In July, "His granddaughter is getting married, let's wait until after that." In August, "Their anniversary is in September and they need to be together one last time." In October, "We're not ready because there's too much to do." And in November, regardless of the circumstance, there's the big one.... "The holidays are coming and we really want them to have one last Christmas together in their home."

There will always be something. There will never be a time when all the planets are in alignment and the transition will be perfect. You will never "be ready." The reality is that your loved one can still participate in all these celebrations and events when they're in assisted living! That does NOT have to change because they always have the freedom to come and go wherever and whenever they wish. For a few hours, a day, a weekend, or an extended visit out of town.

But the holidays? The #1 misconception is that it will be sad and lonely. However, the holidays are the BEST time to be in assisted living! For weeks ahead of time there is something exciting happening. There is traditional music, special foods to enjoy, people visiting, and there is a happy energy in the air. Families are invited to a community Thanksgiving feast and everyone feels like family as they celebrate together. The residents often meet ahead of time, and THEY determine the menu to include family favorites.

And the decorations?? I doubt you will ever see so many gorgeous Christmas trees! They are everywhere all over the building but the one in the lobby will be the crème de la crème! There are also beautiful menorahs to light, dreidels to enjoy, celebrations, and opportunities to learn about traditions of other religions and regions.



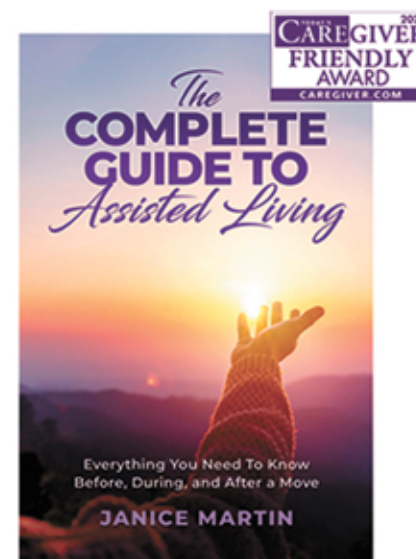
Many years ago, I began my career as an activities director. The first Christmas I worked in a community was quite an eye-opener. I put up and decorated over 10 different trees on every floor, in the lobby, in the dining room, in the activity room - everywhere! I didn't realize this requirement when I was hired, but it was actually fun (and exhausting!) and each tree was a little different. (Hint: after the holidays, cover the decorated tree with a large trash bag, and put it in the garage or empty room. Next year will be much easier!)

Communities will often have an indoor "Festival of Trees" or a "Festival of Wreaths" as a charity fundraiser. Local businesses will purchase a tree or wreath of various sizes and bring it to the community, decorate with a different theme, to be on display and enjoyed for several weeks. The trees will be auctioned, and the highest bidder gets to decide the charity and take the tree home. A community in Ocala does a spectacular event each year to benefit the Alzheimer's Association. There are easily 50+ trees of all shapes, sizes, and themes, followed by a live auction. All the residents participate by enjoying the fun, food, drinks, and excitement!

There are also gingerbread house competitions. I organized one and provided the basic kit to local businesses and departments at the assisted living. They used their imagination to think outside the box for an original creation. The residents were the judges, and the winner got bragging rights. My community had other facilities across the country. There was a company-wide competition to produce the most magnificent one. The final creations were enormous and elaborate and the residents enjoyed watching them come to life. During this competition, there was no limit to the size, but the "house" had to be made from scratch in the community's kitchen. One project actually had a model train running around and through it!

There are also outings on the community bus to look at the Christmas lights, followed by hot cocoa and cookies upon return. Even though a person is in assisted living doesn't mean it will be their last holiday to enjoy and you may be pleasantly surprised that it could be one of the most memorable. I challenge you to convince me that sitting home alone through the holidays with nothing but a turkey TV dinner and a rerun of "It's A Wonderful Life" can begin to compare. If a resident would like to spend time at their family's home, they are welcome to do so. However, it's often overstimulating for many seniors who have difficulty with the (loud) competing conversations and children running everywhere.

In my experience, the holidays are the best time to be in assisted living. Your loved one will be active and busy enjoying the variety of celebrations and the company of others - with the option to simply return to their private apartment to quietly reflect on the things for which they are most thankful.



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