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Students leave lasting impression on Alzheimer's patients

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For Vivianne Mitri, visiting a Claremont senior center isn't just volunteer work—it's a passion.

The second-year business student, who is changing her major to biology, is the founder and president of the Cal Poly Pomona Alzheimer's Buddy Program, which connects students with people battling Alzheimer's disease to provide friendship and support.

Students visit the Claremont Place senior center twice a week to keep the residents company and join them on walks at the Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden, which the club recently partnered with.

Oftentimes, students from the music department bring their instruments and perform for the residents.

"The way that they light up when the music comes on is just incredible," Ms. Mitri says. "They light up when children walk in, or people in general, because they have visitors. They start to recognize that we're coming and they'll be like, 'They're here!' They look forward to it now."

Ms. Mitri was 14 years old when she decided to learn Arabic so she could communicate with her grandmother. Before she could master the language, her grandmother died.

"I was really upset and some part of me thought that I needed to fill a void, so I decided that I wanted to go to the senior center," she said.

On her first day, Ms. Mitri was asked—much to her dismay—to work with the Alzheimer's patients. She had hoped to be matched with patients she could communicate with in a way she hadn't been able to with her grandmother, and feared the disease would create a barrier to that goal.

Ms. Mitri agreed to work with the Alzheimer's patients for that one day.

She met a woman named Doris who wanted to see her family. Ms. Mitri asked the caregivers about it and discovered that Doris' family lived across the street but didn't want to see her.

"I was just devastated," Ms. Mitri said. "I had to visit her every day as much as I could."

Since then, she hasn't stopped.

Ms. Mitri first tried, unsuccessfully, to establish a buddies program at her high school in the last semester of her senior year. She then tried again at Cal Poly Pomona as soon as classes started. She found that the best way to promote the campus club was to go to classes and explain why students should join.

"I could look people in the eye and communicate that there's a cause that they should contribute to," Ms. Mitri said.

The club's objectives are to show the residents that someone cares about them and to help them focus their thoughts. Ms. Mitri encourages students to challenge their buddies to hold a conversation about a single subject by guiding them back when their thoughts wander.



Lisa Hunt, the executive director of Claremont Place, says she is thrilled to work with the Buddy Program.

"What joy it is for the residents to be able to form new friendships and have individual time with their buddies talking, singing, taking a walk, listening to music or just sitting together with a puzzle, book or game," Ms. Hunt says. "Vivianne's experience relating to seniors and the resulting comfort level she exudes is evident as she easily forms one-on-one relationships and is a comforting presence."

During her first few months on campus, Ms. Mitri approached the Cal Poly Pomona Center for Community Engagement with the idea to start the Alzheimer's Buddy Program. She received a Reach Beyond award from the center in May for her efforts.

The Alzheimer's Buddy Program has 15 members. Ms. Mitri believes that the students "have good hearts and they may not know immediately that it's really important, but they'll realize it soon after."

The organization also attracted the attention of University President Soraya Coley. The president visited the senior center to meet with Ms. Mitri's buddy, Edda. She brought flowers and fresh fruit as a gift to the resident, who started crying because she was so happy.

"They were both from North Carolina and, when we walked in, Edda was drawing a picture of her home state. They were able to talk about that, so that was really nice," Ms. Mitri said. "President Coley got to see the impact that she had, so it was a great experience."

Ms. Mitri plans on partnering with an animal shelter to bring pets to the center once a week. She also wants to expand the weekly outings to include the nail salon and other local shops. She also plans to increase the residents' involvement with music by bringing in instruments for them to play.

More than anything, she says she wants the students' relationships with the residents to impact them and influence their college lives the same way she has been impacted.

"Sometimes, I'm at school and I'm feeling stressed out, so I go talk to Edda. She really calms me down and puts me in my place so I can come back ready to go," Ms. Mitri said.

The Alzheimer's Buddy Program has partnered with Harvard's version of the program and expanded to other universities to form the National Alzheimer's Buddy Program.

Ms. Mitri's goals also encompass her care and passion for Alzheimer's patients. She wants to earn a doctorate in neuroscience so she can research degenerative diseases, starting with Alzheimer's. She is looking forward to graduating so that she can dive into research.

Despite her busy schedule, she says that she won't stop visiting her friends at the center.


"I don't even think of it as volunteering anymore," Mitri says. "I still have a lot of disappointments in myself because I can't visit everyone, but I'll always be there for them as long as I can."

—Alicia Balderrama

Alicia Balderrama is a second-year student at Cal Poly Pomona studying communication.

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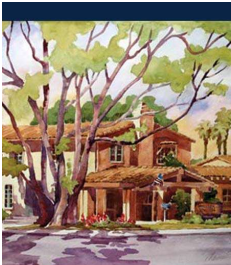
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