

ABOUT THE ACTIVITY AND RECREATION PROFESSION:

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BEING OUR OWN ADVOCATES

Some of us work or have worked for companies who get it and understand that a lot of the happiness of their residents depends on the events, groups, activities, and outings that Activity and Recreation Professionals schedule. I once spoke with an executive director of a senior community who said they had residents move out because there was nothing to do. Further into the conversation, I learned that she only had a part-time Life Enrichment Coordinator without staff (other than a bus driver) whose salary was well under the national average. She did not get it.

TRENDS IN OUR INDUSTRY

Retirement communities are popping up all over the country because since 2014, more than 8,000 Baby Boomers turn 65 every day. Experts say established communities will need dramatic transformations. In an article in the *Washingtonian* magazine, "How Baby Boomers Are Changing Retirement Living" by Will Grunewald in the March 13, 2014 issue, the director of George Mason University's program in senior housing administration, Andrew Carle, states, "Baby boomers want active, intellectually stimulating, and intergenerational retirement environments." He said one resident referred to his retirement community as a "land-based cruise ship." We may as well change our names to Julie McCoy. (She was the cruise director for TVs *The Love Boat* which was on the air from 1977 to 1987 for those too young to remember.) It's going to be our responsibility to engage these seniors for the rest of their lives. There are many marketing and aging studies that show that Boomers want to make the most of their golden years and stay active and connected. Traditionally, the only people providing that at any level are Activity and Recreation Professionals. Does your company realize all of this? If not, who is going to tell them?

Sit down for lunch one day with your members of your marketing department. Ask them some questions about what they are telling prospective residents to entice them. You won't be too surprised to find out that they boast about what the activity or recreation department does regardless of the level of care (independent living, assisted living, memory care, skilled care). They understand the target market more than anyone, but how much do they know about our profession? How much do they know about your education and experience and how you are able to provide such an enticing array of events and activities so that customers will spend their life-savings to be a part of it? Host a Lunch and Learn and educate them...they'll love it!

OUR PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS

Here's a quick look at our professional certifications.

§ *A Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialist (CTRS) through the National Council of Therapeutic Recreation Certification requires a four-year degree involving 18 to 24 credits of therapeutic recreation and courses like anatomy, physiology, abnormal psychology, human growth and development, social sciences, and assessments. It also requires a 560-hour internship, followed by a national exam, with 50 hours of continuing education requirements for renewal every five years. Visit <http://nctrc.org> for more information.

§ *A Certified Activity Director (ADC) through the National Certification Council of Activity Professionals has different ways or tracks people can get this certification. There are other levels of certification, as well. One track requires a four-year degree with coursework similar to that mentioned above, two 90-hour education courses called MEPAP (Modular Education Program for Activity Professionals), and 4,000 hours of employment in the field within five years. People take a national exam and follow up with continuing education of 30 hours every two years for renewal. Visit www.nccap.org for more information.

§ *A national Board Certification for Activity Professional (AP-BC) through the National Association for Activity Professionals Credentialing Center does not require any special courses or classes. Criteria include education, work experience, continuing education, and successfully passing the Competency Exam. One half of the continuing education must be from live face-to-face experiences such as conferences and/or workshops. Renewal is every two years with 30 hours of continuing education. There is certification for Activity Consultant (AC-BC), as well. Visit <http://naapcc.net> for more information.

There are national professional organizations including the American Therapeutic Recreation Association (www.atra-online.com) and National Association of Activity Professionals (<http://naap.info>) that provide educational opportunities and support. There are also organizations on state and local levels that provide education, as well as networking. We are professionals, and it is about time that our profession gets noticed!

Let's acknowledge the elephant in the room - these certifications can require higher education or a college degree. As far as I know, tuition students pay for undergraduate degrees (i.e., pre-law, accounting, recreation) may not be too different, but the salaries definitely vary in the workplace. Hopefully, the more we can show how professional we are, the more we can start to see positive changes in salaries. Certifications, specific qualifications, and even college degrees may also be required by many companies for Activity or Recreation Directors working in skilled care settings. No matter who you work with, there is no doubt you bring a lot of experience and education to the table. You also can't put a number on the passion and enthusiasm you bring. Let's face it, most of the success of your program depends on you.

WHAT WE CAN DO TO SPREAD THE WORD

What can we do to market our professionalism? Spreading the word must begin with us so start the crusade inside your community and work your way out. How are you viewed by your co-workers? Do they say that they wish they had your job so they could play all day? If so, count to 10 then calmly respond, "If you ever have a free day, I would love for you to shadow me to see it's much more than that!" Do you attend morning meetings? If so, are you reporting on what is happening that day or week? Give your cohorts a quiz. List several activities you offer and ask staff to check the box(es) which applies for intellectual, creative, social, spiritual, physical, emotional, and/or vocational. Next, point out how much of what we provide usually covers not just one category but several and how much planning goes into facilitating them. Show them the big picture and how we focus on the little things that are meaningful to each resident to provide a joyful quality of life. Who else does that?

Share the details of this awesome profession within your community of residents, family members, volunteers, administration, and staff members. Perfect times to hand out brochures or newsletters highlighting the benefits of keeping active and the range of programs offered for the residents' interests and socialization are during National Activity Professionals' Week, the third week of January - January 22 - 28 in 2017 - and Recreational Therapy / Therapeutic Recreation Month in February. Don't forget to include quotes from residents and their family members and staff, too. Offer educational programs for the non-activity staff on how to engage easily with residents in meaningful one-to-one visits or in small groups. Never be afraid to print and share copies of articles you find about the profession and the benefits of what we provide. Leave them in the employee lounges or ask your inservice coordinator to share them. Make a slide show of photos of residents involved in activities and/or create a display to highlight the past year. Although we would enjoy being recognized, these are the best times to do some self-promoting. Plan an extra-special week (or month) of events to engage more residents and educate more staff.

If you are part of a larger continuing care retirement community, no matter what level you work in, be sure that you are contributing to each newsletter, even if it is to highlight or include what special events your department is hosting or a call to recruit volunteers. If you are working for a larger corporation, be sure you are contributing information for the corporate quarterly publications, web sites, social media pages, and more.

GETTING THE WORD OUT TO THE PUBLIC

Share your stories with the local community but keep in mind your company's policies regarding media relations. Bigger doesn't always mean better; sometimes, small stories fare better in the feel-good portions of your local news. If your home partners with a school or organization or is raising money or awareness for a cause, you may have a better chance of making it a story worth covering. Good news in the newspaper and on TV is always good to see!

There are other ways to tout our profession outside of the companies where we work. You can join your local Activity / Recreation Professional association and work together to reach out and spread the word without violating HIPAA regulations or company policies. Publicize workshops, host educational sessions for seniors or their caregivers in the community, and/or start a collaborative volunteer recruitment group that benefits all of your programs.

Reach out to local senior, adult, and youth groups from churches and community organizations. Contact guidance counselors who can get you in touch with teachers so you can arrange a visit in local schools. Share with these groups not only what they can do for you but what you are doing for your community as a profession. Tell the stories you hear every day, the joyful experiences of your residents, and the dedication of those who care for them...including you! I have a simple PowerPoint presentation I have shown to elementary school students before they interact with the residents. It simply shows photos under titles such as *We love to have fun!*, *We love animals!*, *We adore kids!*, *We love to be a part of the community!*, and *Come have fun with us!* It helps the children feel more comfortable by showing the residents having fun.

Blogs, Facebook®, Pinterest®, and other sites provide easy ways to promote what we do; however, be aware of what policies your company has about social media. You may be able to post ideas and news but not photos of residents. If everyone on your personal social media accounts knows what you do and how much you like doing it, word will spread, and you may even enlighten your followers. Be sure to join professional networks on those sites, too!

We all know why we do what we do and we do it with heart and passion so our residents see the importance every day. The benefits are invaluable, and others won't realize it until they start comparing senior communities and ask the question, "What quality of life do I want as I age?" We, my friends, are the answer. It lies with us and our profession. Start spreading the word!

Becky started her professional career as a teacher in central New York. She has more than 17 years' experience as an Activity / Recreation Director in skilled care. For the last 15 years, she has been working at a continuing care retirement community in the Charlotte, NC area. CF

**This was the established criteria at the time of this writing and can change anytime without notice.*