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## Making a calm environment for its patients

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NORTHAMPTON - To the untrained eye, it looks just like an ordinary retirement home.

But the Gardens, a new facility at the Rockridge Retirement Community off North King Street, is designed specially for people with Alzheimer's disease and other conditions that cause dementia.

'Everything that the Gardens has is therapeutic, to make a calm environment for the patients,' said Program Director Jeannie Banas. Everything, that is, from lighting to upholstery to tableware.

Along with the well-known symptom of memory loss, people with Alzheimer's can also lose depth perception and peripheral vision. They can have trouble speaking or expressing themselves, and sometimes forget basic life skills like walking. And with these challenges can also come behavioral problems and moments of agitation.

Most of these conditions can't be treated with surgery or medication, Banas noted, so sometimes what is needed is a change in environment. For one, that means eliminating distractions like TV shows and even patterns in rugs or wallpaper.

Banas was hired by Rockridge earlier this year to create the Gardens - a task that required as much attention to these kinds of details as it did training staff.

The facility, which opened Sept. 5, is the first of its kind in the Northampton area. What makes it distinct, Banas said, is that it offers an alternative to the more institutional setting and approach of nursing homes and extended care centers.

With a degree in gerontology from Quinnipiac University, Banas has worked with Alzheimer's patients for about 20 years in nursing homes and



CHARLES ABEL  
Lila Laura sits with a CNA at Rockridg dining area in the of the Rockridge R Community. The h to offer an alterna institutional feel o  
**Enlarge photo**

hospitals around the northeast.

About 10 of those years were spent at an assisted living center in western New York that pioneered the type of care practiced now at Rockridge. After that, Banas worked for six years teaching care techniques at the Alzheimer's Association of Massachusetts.

'I came to Rockridge to put into practice everything I've taught,' Banas said.

At the Gardens, all the day's events are 'cued,' said marketing director Rachael Colacino. While people with Alzheimer's may have forgotten how to hold or use utensils, they can follow staff members' lead. Mimicry, Banas and Colacino said, is one ability that doesn't seem to be affected by the disease.

Dusk can bring anxiety and agitation for people with Alzheimer's, a condition called sundowning. To help keep residents calm and focused during this time of day, curtains are drawn and ceiling lights shine brightly to emulate sunlight.

People with Alzheimer's often have difficulty remembering recent events, but their long term memory remains sharp into the disease's later stages, Colacino said. The dining room tables at the Gardens are stocked with 'conversation cards' meant to keep those old memories fresh and to stimulate interaction between the residents.

Rather than numbers, which can be forgotten or cause confusion, residents use familiar images like family photos to identify their bedrooms.

People with Alzheimer's can also be prone to wandering. Banas' design for the Gardens takes that into account by placing knickknacks like purses and scarves or activities like puzzles and games all over the facility.

'If they get bored, behaviors are going to start appearing,' Banas said.

While there's plenty to keep Gardens residents occupied, Banas said she and her co-workers still have to be vigilant.

'We don't say 'no' on the unit,' Banas said. 'If they're harming themselves or harming someone else, there's a lot of redirecting. The staff have to be one step ahead.'

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