

“It’s a people’s institution- -let the people decide...”

-Ross Altman

## INTRODUCTION

A folk singer says in his song, “Minstrel In Tinsel Town”: “I am a middle age troubadour in a city that worships youth” (Altman 1996). This statement portrays the reality of our culture as a whole because we live in a society that portrays the elderly as frail, declining, problematic, and senile. What we, the younger people, forget sometimes is that we all are heading towards the stigma of being old. Usually, people associate the word “retirement home” with senility and seclusion and, by doing so, they attach a stigma to these places and the individuals who live there. A retirement home is not always a place of senility and seclusion, because there we also can find people who are still active and productive in the community. Most of the information from scholars about the elderly has been written about how age affects the individual negatively, but there is not much written about older people whose lives are active and who continue to work.

The ethos of a retirement home, can promote an environment in which ex-activists would be able to enjoy engaging in the same types of activities that they were doing, in the real world. By doing so, the political activists together with the members of the staff create a familiar environment for the residents, so that they can spend the late stages of their lives surrounded by their “own.” They can continue to be actively engaged in contributing to society.

Golden Nest was founded by women in 1923 as a retirement home for religious liberals, and today it is run as an independent, non-profit organization. By engaging in participant observation, at Golden Nest, I was able to find that there is a correlation between how the institution is run and how this institution de-emphasizes the stigma of a retirement home. In other words, in order to attract individuals who are engaged in activities promoting social change, the staff members together with the residents create an environment more like a home for radical people rather than an institution for the aged.

Just as individuals can engage in stigma management, so too institutions can also engage in a similar type of stigma reduction. In my setting, the strategy used by the institution to manage the stigma of retirement homes promotes active involvement in life rather than an emphasis on aging. For example, Golden Nest provides to its residents activities related to social change. As Goffman (1963) states, “By definition, of course, we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human,” so we reduce the person into something inferior and by end discriminate against them (In Pontell 1999:58). A retirement home carries a stigma by itself and thus, the residents who live in the retirement home also bear the stigma attached to it. Since my setting is a place in which the majority of the people share a similar past of fighting for social change, the institution in which they live also engages in that fight, which is to promote a more humanistic view of retirement homes.

People may want to spend their late stages in life in a retirement home, surrounded by others who were engaged in the same type of activities during their youth. Goffman (1963) refers to the “own” as individuals who share the same stigma; and he argues that among his “own” an individual can find comfort, understanding, moral support, and can also be “accepted as a person who really is like any other normal person”(In Pontell 1999: 64). In my setting the majority of the residents share a similar past history of political activism and social change, so they are spending the late stages of their lives among their “own.” By finding the support and understanding of the institution and other residents, they can

continue engaging in political activism. Thus, the institution cares for the needs of healthy older persons to have active lives.

In contrast the caregivers of persons suffering from mental deterioration use restrictive strategies in order to have control over certain situations. Blum argues that the caregivers of the person suffering from Alzheimer's "takes control of the other party's definition of the situation" so the third party will see the person suffering from Alzheimer's "less in moral terms and more in medical terms" (1991: 279). In my setting I found a variation of this argument. The residents of Golden Nest who act as the "caregivers" of other residents suffering from mental deficiencies tend to reframe the situation in a way that the stigma of mental illness is not mentioned. They explain an embarrassing situation, what Goffman (1963) might call a discredited encounter (In Pontell 1999: 58) as something related to the personality or inability of a person and not as something related to the disease. People who live in this retirement home see the person suffering from the disease not as an ill person, but more as a human being deserving the right to be treated properly.

Stigma can be attached to places, and by doing so, the people who live in these places also share the stigma of the place without possessing it, i.e. really having those symptoms. Goffman (1963) indicates that "the term stigma, then, will be used to refer to an attribute that is deeply discrediting, but it should be seen that a language of relationships, not attributes, is really needed" in order to be discrediting. Goffman (1963) also uses the term "virtual social identity" to define the assumptions attributed to the person, only by their appearance, and the term "actual social identity" to define the attributes that the stigmatized person "in fact proves to possess" (In Pontell 1999: 57). In my setting, not all of the residents sharing the stigma of living in a retirement home are senile or secluded; many of them are still productive and engaged in activities of the outside world. In this case, the fact that they live in a retirement home is a "virtual social identity" and "deeply discrediting," but since the attributes attached to this social identity are not present in all the residents, their "actual social identity" is more that of a person still engaged with the outside world.

I propose that Golden Nest is an institution that provides the evaluative setting for people engaged in social change to spend the late stages of their lives. The residents can be surrounded by their "own"; thus, they create a home for elderly people in which to engage in the same type of activities that they were engaged in before entering the institution. In analyzing my data, I discerned four themes that support this interpretation. First, the ethos of Golden Nest urges outsiders to view the institution more as a place in which active leftists find comfort, and understanding of their needs than as one with the stigma of senility and desolation attached to retirement homes. Second, the residents in my setting have a history of commitment to fighting for social change, so they choose to spend the late stages of their lives among their "own," individuals who share the same interest. Third, because of the residents' backgrounds in understanding and caring for human rights, they demonstrate those qualities in dealing with residents whose minds are in decline. Instead of dwelling on the stigma of the disease, residents turn its symptoms into something positive or choose traits similar to the disease from the patient's personal character to discuss, in order to avoid mentioning the stigma. Finally, many of the residents are able to demonstrate that the stigma of senility and seclusion attached to retirement homes is only a "virtual social identity" since many of them are still productive and engage in different activities. Before discussing these themes, I describe the setting and the methods used to collect and process the data.

## SETTING:

My research was done in a Licensed Board and Care facility for seniors that is run as an independent, non-profit organization. Golden Nest is located in a metropolitan area, where the streets create a mosaic of residential and commercial areas; most of the population are Latinos. The neighborhood is not considered safe and there is a problem with gangs in the area. This institution has been operating in the same location for almost 80 years; it was founded as a retirement home for religious liberals. The facility is a two-story Spanish Courtyard style building, with 40 apartments. The structure is well kept; and the walls at the entrance are painted with brightly colored flowers. Inside, on the first floor, there is a big living room in which most of the activities take place. This room also has a big television, which is tuned either to CNN or CBS when other activities are not going on. On the second floor there is a library with an extensive collection of books. The collection ranges from books on Marxism to works of English literature. The types of services that this institution offers to the residents are meals, laundry, activities, excursions, assistance with bathing, transportation to medical appointments, and certain personal services according to the needs of each resident.

There are around twelve staff members and most of them are individuals representing such minority groups as women, Latinos, African Americans, and Asians. The majority of the activities that Golden Nest advertises and offers to the residents are oriented towards political activism and social change. Some volunteers, who are also inclined towards social change, sponsor activities. The volunteers engage in such activities as playing music for the residents, taking them on trips, giving lectures, organizing discussion groups, reading aloud, providing company, and donating their time toward remodeling the facility. The capacity of the place is for 40 residents but there were only 28 during the time that I was doing my research, and the majority were women. Most of the residents are political liberals and do not have religious affiliations. The types of activities that they were engaged in during the earlier period of their lives, and are still engaged in, were oriented toward helping people, changing society, fighting against inequality, and promoting peace and understanding. All of the residents have one or more disabilities, such as losing their vision or hearing, dealing with Alzheimer's, or having difficulty walking.

Since I decided to do a research project on aging, my Sociology professor tried to contact a retirement home for people suffering from Alzheimer's. Because I had no experience working with people suffering from Alzheimer's, I decided to call a friend of mine who used to be on the board of directors of a retirement home, to ask him for a reference. Because my friend lost contact with the retirement home since he left the board of directors, he gave me the phone number of his accountant, who is a volunteer in this retirement home. I called the accountant and he gave me the name and address of the place. He also gave me the name of the person to contact. I told my professor about this place and she encouraged me to call. I tried to call the director and after trying many times; I finally got to speak to and make an appointment with him.

Entering the field was not difficult in my case because this institution is always willing to take volunteers. Wax (1971), in her article, "The Ambiguities of Fieldwork," explains that it is easier in some cases than others to gain access to the place of study and argues that "In a complex culture there are groups or societies that solicit membership, and a fieldworker will have no trouble at all in becoming a participating member if he is willing to pay the expected price of money or time" (Emerson 1971: 194). On my first meeting with the director of the retirement home, I let him know that I was working on a research project about aging and needed a place to do my research. By disclosing my situation I was

able to gain access as a member since he decided that I could combine my needs with theirs. The director of the place said that they have a great interest in collecting oral histories of people that live there because many of them have had very interesting lives in their earlier years. He thought that I could do the oral histories while doing my research.

During my first visit to the setting, and after having been accepted as a member, I received the title of volunteer. The director introduced me to the top staff, since they had a meeting the same day that I entered the field, and told them that I was going to be a volunteer that would be conducting research. The same day I was introduced to some of the residents during their "wine and cheese party," which takes place every Wednesday. I was able to tell them that I was working on a research project about aging for my Sociology class. During the second day of fieldwork, I was able to join the residents in the living room, which allowed me to meet new residents. The assistant of the director of activities introduced me to the residents, and I was able to interact with them and tell them about my research project. At the beginning they used to refer to me as a student or volunteer doing research. That same day, one of the volunteers asked me if I was visiting a resident; after I gave her a negative answer, one of the residents said, "She is doing research on us." After I stopped taking notes and had spent more time in the field, the only person who mentioned my research was the director. I was also able to interact with the members of the staff and gain information from some of them by using some strategies. One of the staff members is from the same country that I am, so she speaks Spanish to me. The residents view this situation as beneficial, since they believe meeting someone from my own country is comforting. When I speak to her, the residents don't pay much attention because they do not think that we are talking about them.

I also used to smoke on the patio with some of the staff members; this gave me the opportunity to talk to them about the residents, who saw me simply as someone taking a cigarette break. I was assigned to take care of the office on two occasions. The residents asked questions as if I was a staff member, but I told them that I was a volunteer performing this service as a favor to the staff. I also made sure to leave the door of the office open all the time, to show that there were no differences between the residents and me. The staffs usually close the door emphasizing the distinction between themselves and the residents. Some of the residents in this retirement home suffer from mental diseases. After a few weeks in the field, I realized that I was collecting a great amount of data on interaction with people whose mental capacities are in decline. Wieder (1974) suggests that in the beginning it helps not to read too much about what one is going to study, because if one does, observation may take the same direction as one's reading (In Emerson 1983: 79). In this case, my ignorance about people whose mental capacities are in decline helped me to look at their interaction with an open mind. My ignorance about aging made me feel a little uncomfortable at the beginning of my research, but since most of the residents in my setting were women, I was able to interact with them woman-to-woman, despite the age difference.

## METHODS

I was encouraged by the assistant of the director of activities to take notes while I was on the setting because all the members of the setting knew that I was doing research. I decided to stop taking notes after my fourth visit to the site because one of the residents asked me why I was taking notes. After I responded that I was doing a research project and that I was going to be writing oral histories of some of the residents, she said: "This is not a place to do research." I also noticed that some of the residents were observing me while I was taking notes, so I decided to start jotting information down in my car

right after leaving the setting. In the setting, I took notes only while I was writing the oral histories of the residents. I was able to collect my data by spending approximately ten hours per week at the facility over a period of seven weeks. Most of my data came from the interaction between residents, since I spent more time with them than with the staff. Each day, after spending between 3 to 7 hours in the field, I went home and wrote field notes. This took more time than I spent in the field, since I was writing detailed field notes. After having a few sets of field notes, I engaged in a process of reading my data and searching for indigenous and exogenous meanings.

The initial procedure was to start excerpting the passages in my field notes that interested me most, and writing analytical memos on them. During the same period I spent time doing open coding. By doing the open coding, I was able to see some patterns in what was happening in the setting and to use those patterns writing the memos. I decided to use the old method in order to sort the themes that I was finding from the open-coding since I found it helpful to have all the data spread out in one place in order to shuffle the pieces of paper and look for patterns and variations. After a period of time I started to do focused coding in order to be able to find sub-themes, and locate variations that I perceived. As I started to do the focused coding I also started to write integrative memos. During the process of writing the integrative memos, I still engaged in coding. This process was not step-by-step, since I used to go back and do more coding, reuse the initial memos, yet again do more focused coding, and change the themes, before beginning to draft my research paper.

Emerson and Pollner (1983) argue that “The available options in any particular setting may furnish opportunities to minimize the likelihood of unwanted overtures” (In Emerson 1983: 243). In my case I had many options available which precluded overture. Since I did not have a specific task to perform in my setting, I had freedom of movement and could decide where to go and what to do each day. Whenever I felt that I was getting in a difficult situation, I moved to a different room or found a way to tell the person that I was dealing with that I had other tasks. On one occasion, a resident insinuated that I should converse with one of the staff members because he was a nice person. In this case I tried to change the topic of the conversation, but since, the resident mentioned the same topic more than once, after few minutes I decided to tell her that I had something to do in the kitchen.

From the beginning of my research, I decided not to stick only with one group of people or to do only one task, because I wanted to avoid unwanted overture. I also wanted to avoid having the members identify me as preferring only one group of people. Another tactic that I used was to come at different times of the day. Since I never had a schedule to come to the setting, I tried to arrive at different times of the day, in order to spend time with a variety of people and to do a range of tasks. Another strategy that I used was to listen to the gossip that both the staff and the residents told me but not to make any comment about it. Those strategies not only allowed me to prevent unwanted overture but also helped me become a natural part of the institution, which allowed me to observe more interactions without disturbing the participants with my presence.

The first ethical issue that I had to confront in my setting was that I had to decide whether to spend time writing the oral histories or to write up my own data. At the beginning I decided to combine both, but since my time was limited, I decided to spend more time on my research. After it was over I would still be in the field and could write the oral histories. While working on my research project I spent most of my time with the residents, doing so made my position in the field the resident oriented. Van Maanen (1978), in his article “The Moral Fix: On the Ethics of Fieldwork,” states that in some cases “fieldwork demands of the researcher an ability to allow to pass without accusatory comment certain actions that

may well be viewed as morally repugnant” (In Emerson 1983: 279). Since my alignment was with the residents, some of my observations made me condemn certain actions of the staff members as morally wrong. As my research was progressing, I started to do some tasks that the staff members have to perform on a daily basis, such as helping the residents that are unable to walk by themselves, or looking after the residents suffering from Alzheimer’s. I then realized that what I was judging as morally wrong was understood to be, by both the residents and the staff something out of their control due to human limitations. For a while I was harshly judging the staff members for taking more care of the physical needs of the residents than of their needs for affection and communication. I learned that in fact, their time was limited and that they did take care of those needs whenever they had the opportunity of doing so. Another ethical dilemma that I had to deal with was writing personal information about the residents in my field notes. The residents and the staff were aware of my research but did not know specifically what I was engaged in. They did not ask me specific questions about my research so I tried to avoid engaging in conversations about school. That made me feel uncomfortable at first but I overcame this feeling after realizing that my research was taking an orientation that did not dishonor the institution and its members.

## ANALYSIS

The following analysis examines the process by which this retirement home appeals to radical individuals. Because this is so, the institution (together with the residents) creates an environment less like an institution and more like a home for like-minded people. First, the institution manages to avoid the stigma attached to retirement homes. Second, in telling their life histories, the residents emphasize similar patterns through which they create a common heritage. Third, the residents avoid stigmatizing the people whose mental capacities are declining. Fourth, the elderly people in Golden Nest are not all senile and secluded.

### Management of Institutional Stereotypes

Not only are individuals engaged in stigma management but also institutions find devices to manipulate the information given to outsiders. This control of information allows the staff members to advertise the setting as a home for active radicals. They stress that residents are provided with politically oriented activities and that they also participate in decision-making at the institution. Thus outsiders are inspired by these characteristics of the institution, which is no ordinary old folk’s home.

In some cases, information about the institution is provided to outsiders beforehand, which allows staff members to influence the outsiders to envision the institution according to the point of view that they are providing in advance. In this case Josh, the director of Golden Nest, is introducing me to the setting.

Josh emphasizes that this place is not a “regular” type of retirement home and that some of the people here were involved with labor unions and political movements. I say to him that to hear that makes me even more interested [about doing my research here].

The main person of the institution controls information and orients the outsider to envision this home as different. Josh emphasizes “that this place is not a ‘regular’ type of retirement home,” so he can orient the outsider to view the place as unique. Mentioning the political involvement of the residents directs the outsider to perceive the setting more as a home in which radical people are spending the late stages of their lives rather than as a typical retirement home. After listening to what Josh said to me, I

demonstrated a greater interest in doing my research at this institution; this proves that Josh was able to impact the outsider's perspective. Giving such a background, staff persuades outsiders to see the institution through their lenses.

In addition to oral information provided by members of the staff, the institution employs written materials that promote a positive view of this retirement home. One type of written material is the schedule of activities that the institution provides for the residents. The schedule is placed in locations that are easily accessible to outsiders, such as at the entrances to the dining room and the waiting room. The majority of activities are politically oriented, as the following excerpt indicates:

Every Wednesday they have the wine and cheese party [in which they talk about current issues and also discuss issues concerning Golden Nest]..., once a month they have the Socialist Party Update..., every Wednesday the Free Thinkers... have a discussion session [in which they discuss major political issues].

Many of the events displayed in the schedule of activities are politically oriented since that is the approach that the institution wants outsiders to focus on. The "wine and cheese party" represents the residents' involvement in the political issues of the country and also demonstrates that the residents are informed about what is going on in the institution. This indicates that this is not a place of seclusion but one that encourages individuals to be active in and outside the institution, something that makes this place special. The participation of the Socialist Party in Golden Nest reflects that the residents are getting first hand information from this source and also indicates their political affiliation. The "Free Thinkers" discussion session indicates that the residents are still engaged in activities concerning the political issues of the country and that they still have something to say about what is going on in an outside world which also affects them. Through this type of media the institution is also showing that the residents are not communist party members, since their affiliation is with institutions promoting social. The schedule of activities describes the type of activities in which the residents are involved and by doing so it promotes a view of the place as one in which the residents are politically active.

A similar type of written material are the pamphlets used to advertise the facility, which contain information indicating that this is a place where people do not live in seclusion. Instead, they are active, engaged in the decision-making of the institution, and in contact with the outside world. This excerpt is from a pamphlet advertising the institution:

Who are the residents of Golden Nest? They are vibrant people who want to continue the activities that make their lives meaningful, and they want a place where they feel comfortable and at home... The Residents Council has a voice in making decisions about the day-to-day issues affecting resident's lives... Issues of peace and justice are important to many residents. The Golden Nest community supports residents' involvement in our community and our society.

The pamphlet characterizes residents as "vibrant people" by doing so it orients outsiders' picture of the type of people found in this place. Mentioning the "Residents Council" is communicating that this is not a regular institution. In the majority of institutions, the residents are not involved in making decisions that affect them. The pamphlet also indicates that "peace and justice are important to many residents." In this case, the institution is characterizing the residents who live there as socially aware and also creating a positive view of Golden Nest itself. Supporting "involvement in our community and our

society” indicates that they encourage the residents to live participating in the activities of the outside world. The pamphlet highlights the characteristic that makes Golden Nest different from the rest of retirement homes.

Golden Nest, by providing the residents with the same types of activities that they were engaged in during the earlier stages of their lives, attracts compatible individuals with the same interests. That is how they manage to demonstrate to the outside world that this institution is more like a home for elderly engage in political activism than like a sad, secluded retirement home. By stressing these political views, they are able to attract individuals who share a similar heritage.

### History of Residents

The past history of a person may influence the decision making of where a person is going to spend the late stages of his/her life. While telling their history, the residents at Golden Nest accentuate their past involvement in caring about human beings and also their active involvement in promoting social change. Even though the residents manifest past engagement in diverse affairs, such as promoting understanding among people, doing social work, and being involved in labor unions, those activities have a common goal: To build a more equal and understanding society.

Some residents at Golden Nest were engaged in activities targeting understanding among people and those ideals are still present in them during the late stages of their lives. Ruth, a resident, told me this portion of her life history:

She says that she belongs to the Esperanto Club. Ruth says that Esperanto is an international language and that she knows how to speak it... She then adds that she believes in “freedom and equality” and that she does “not believe in wars, status, and [inequality of the] sexes.” She says: “All people are the same. They don’t look the same but they are the same.” Then she says that “people speak different languages but that people can also learn different languages.”

Many points of this excerpt show the resident’s concern about understanding among people. Ruth relays the information that she belongs to the Esperanto Club, and indicates that she promotes a universal language because of her concern about people being able to understand one another. Ruth believes that promoting understanding between people will help lead to freedom and equality. She conveys her belief, “people can... learn different languages” and that understanding among people can be achieved through language.

A different type of activity that demonstrates residents’ past involvement in promoting a more understanding society is through their hardly worked with, understood, and cared for handicapped individuals. Amy is the resident from whom I excerpt the following oral history:

Amy says: “I been a Social Worker for 50 years.” Then she points out to me two paintings that she has hanging on one of the wall of her room. Both of the paintings are very colorful and look like post cards. Amy says that the paintings were done by retarded children. I reply that the paintings look like the work of professional artists. Amy says: “They can be retarded and they can still be artistic.” She points to one of the paintings and says: “This young fellow has articles in newspapers.” I ask her if she used to work with retarded children. Amy says: “I worked with the parents.” She then says while still looking at the paintings: “I liked my job, but eventually you have to retire.” There is a pause and then

she says: "I worked until I was 76."

Some residents share a past of having provided services to people that are in need of care and understanding. Amy, by choosing a career in social services keep for 50 years, confirms her concern about people. She then shows her caring for and understanding of the people that she served by showing the paintings done by retarded children that she had worked with. Hanging the paintings on her wall and telling me about them shows that Amy still appreciates the qualities of the retarded children. She engages in making the stigma of those children less visible by telling me "They can be retarded and they can still be artistic." Thus she engages in demonstrating to me that those children are also valuable, proving it by showing that she was able to love and care for them. Amy's career in social services indicates her appreciation of and understanding about people.

A more revolutionary example of caring about and concern for people is the participation of some residents in Labor Unions. In this excerpt I speak of Paula, Daphne, Mary, and Wendy, residents who were all involved in Labor Unions.

Mary says that she was involved with unions. Paula says that she was also involved in unions and she explains to me the different teacher's unions that we have in California... Wendy says that she spent a great amount of her life involved in unions, but she does not explain more and turns her body towards the lady that is sitting on the sofa near the entrance, and says of this woman that she, Daphne, was also very active with the unions.

Many of the residents live in this institution because they are able to share with other residents a background of social activism. Mary, Paula, and Wendy's involvement in unions indicates that they were concerned about the rights of workers. Paula is explaining to me about the different teacher's unions in California so confirms her continuing involvement in labor issues. Wendy, by providing information about Daphne's past involvement in the unions, shows that the residents are aware of each other's past activism. Clearly, this part of their lives is important to them and that is the reason why they share it with one another. Their past involvement indicates their mutual striving for a society in which the right of individuals will be respected.

A person can carry some character aspects during all stages of their life. In this case, the residents of Golden Nest worked towards achieving a more understanding and rightful society during their youth and they still keep those characteristics during the late stages of their life. They not only apply those characteristics in the outside world, but also apply them inside the institution, which has now become a part of their world.

### Residents Disguise the Stigma of Other Residents

Some of the residents manage to control the information provided to outsiders in order to make the stigmatized person seem more human and less deviant. The residents engage in interpreting embarrassing situations, created by people whose minds are declining, as a situation caused by the character of the person instead of the disease.

The residents are engaged in using a person's distinctive nature, which does not carry a stigma, in order

to explain an uncomfortable situation caused by people suffering from dementia. They explain the situation as attributable to the person's character rather than as a consequence of mental deterioration. In this situation, Daphne is a resident who suffers dementia. Martha, Alan, and Judith are also residents.

I start to walk towards the office with Judith. Daphne yells at me that I do not belong in this place. Then she says to me: "This is not the zoo. Go and take pictures of the snakes." I pass by and just look at her. Judith looks at her also and she keeps on walking. I am in the waiting room while Judith is entering the office. Martha says: "Julia" I approach to her. She asks me what Daphne was saying to me. I tell Martha what she said... Martha says not to pay attention to Daphne... Alan looks at Daphne and shakes his head. Martha says that Daphne tells everybody to go away. Then she tells me not to feel bad because Daphne is just that way.

In order to avoid telling me that Daphne suffers from dementia, Martha uses Daphne's personality as a way to comfort me. Daphne yells at me without any reason, so that makes me feel uncomfortable. Martha is aware of the situation in saying; "not to pay attention to Daphne" she indicates that she is trying to repair the situation. Alan looks at Daphne and shakes his head, by doing so; he supports Martha's statement. The consensus also denotes that Alan is backing up Martha's effort to interpret the situation since he, too does not say that Daphne suffers from dementia. Martha describes the situation as normal. Martha avoids stigmatizing Daphne by reinterpreting the effects of the disease into something caused by Daphne's personality. It is better to be a cranky person than to be a demented one. Martha makes the situation seem normal so that the tension will be broken.

In some cases language barriers can be used to avoid revealing the stigma of a person suffering from Alzheimer's. In this case we are sitting in the living room listening to a speaker giving us the updates of the "Young Socialists." Amy is a resident and Claudia is a resident suffering from Alzheimer's.

Claudia starts to make noises while looking at the speakers and at the audience. Sounds like she is talking in another language... The speakers are looking at Claudia and one of them is getting closer to Claudia. The speaker looks at Claudia. Claudia keeps on talking. The speaker opens her eyes and raises her eyebrow and then looks at the audience. Amy says: "She speaks Yiddish and we don't understand Yiddish." The rest of the audience is quiet and the speaker returns to her seat... [and continues her speech].

In this case Amy uses Claudia's ability to speak Yiddish in order to avoid telling the speaker that Claudia suffers from Alzheimer's. Claudia reveals her stigma by speaking in what seems like a different language, but looking at the audience and speakers she appears to be addressing something real. The speaker shows confusion when she "opens her eyes and raises her eyebrows" then looked at the audience requesting an explanation. At this point the residents need to interpret the situation either by revealing the disease or by making an excuse. Amy then takes control of the situation and manages to avoid releasing the stigma by saying: "She [Claudia] speaks Yiddish and we don't understand Yiddish." By using the language barrier and the inability of the audience to understand that language Amy manages to comfort the speaker and also avoid revealing the stigma. Language barriers are used by the residents in order to avoid revealing that another person suffers from Alzheimer's.

A different way to manage the stigma of a person suffering from Alzheimer's is by revealing information

about the personality and past achievements of the person who suffers from Alzheimer's before the stigma is mentioned. In this case I am introducing myself to Kathy, who is a resident, but she does not tell me her name. Paula is another resident and decides to speak for Kathy.

She [Paula] then looks at the lady that did not answer my question and then looks at me again and says gently and softly: "Kathy doesn't talk." Then she mentions that Kathy used to teach at UCLA but now she suffers from Alzheimer's.

In this case Paula is portraying Kathy as a full human being with the option of speaking or not speaking. By using a gentle tone of voice, Paula creates a more soothing environment for acceptance and empathy. Paula makes it sound as if Kathy has a choice, not that she is unable to answer my question. Paula then uses Kathy's past achievements to make the present situation even less distressing. After having the ground ready for a more empathic view, Paula relays Kathy's stigma by saying that "now she suffers of Alzheimer's."

The residents at this institution engage in superimposing a peculiarity of the character of a person suffering from a mental disease to avoid revealing disease or to lessen the effect of revealing the disease. The residents also demonstrate that the outside world stigmatizes people who live in retirement homes as senile; in reality, not all the people in a retirement home fit those characteristics.

### Stereotypical Image of a Resident versus Real Image of a Resident

By living in a retirement home, the residents are already discredited by the outside world because the "Virtual social identity" of a resident in a retirement home is one of senility and seclusion. In fact, the "actual social identity" of many of the residents in this specific setting is that of a still productive person who is engaged in the activities of the outside world. They are learning new skills, are involved in the election process of the country, and are engaged in tutoring others.

Some of the resident are still engaged in learning the new technology and use the skills learned in a productive manner. In this excerpt, Jane is a resident and we are talking about her knowledge of the Internet:

Jane tells me that they were in the New York Times a few months ago. I told her that Josh gave me a copy of the article... She says that there was another article in which they were on the front page of the paper... She also says that by that time she had the web ready and that many people sent them e-mail. I ask her if she was the one that made the web page for Golden Nest. She says that she made the web page that was used when they appeared in the front page of the New York Times and that forty people sent e-mail. I say that it was an excellent job and also say that I don't know how to make a web page, asking her how she learned. She says that she has a computer in her room and that she bought a book that explains how to do it.

In this case Jane is a resident who is still learning about the new technology. She is not only engaged in learning but also able to apply it to benefiting the institution. In order to be able to make a web page a person needs to have the proper skills. Haven made the web page for Golden Nest proves that Jane has the skills needed. Jane's remark about their having received forty pieces of e-mails shows that her work

was fruitful and also that she is a productive person. The fact that she learned how to make a web page only by following the instructions from a book suggests that she is constantly improving herself and that she is capable of adapting herself to the changing world. In this case Jane is a resident who is not sedentary but she is still involved in learning new skills and in putting into practice what she learns.

Some other residents in Golden Nest engage their time in the decision making process of the country by keeping themselves well informed about political issues and by voting during elections. Martha and Alan are residents and we are talking about politics.

Martha asks me if I would vote for Elizabeth Dole if tomorrow were Election Day. I say to her: "I am not too sure." Then I ask her: "Is Elizabeth going to run?"... Martha then says to me: 'I don't know [Dole is not a candidate yet], but if she runs I will vote for her.' Martha says to me that she likes politics and that she is always aware of what is going on and then she turns to look at Alan... I then ask Alan, who is... listening to my conversation with Martha, "would you vote for her?"... Alan then says to me... that he is not going to vote for her and 'she [Elizabeth Dole] is not going to win.'

This excerpt demonstrates that Alan and Martha are aware of the country's political situation and that they are engaged in the elective process. By asking me if I would vote for Elizabeth Dole, Martha shows that she is aware of what is going on in today's politics because Dole is a possible candidate. This means that Martha is following news about the election. Then Martha admits that she likes politics, which indicates that she is not secluded and sedentary but actually well informed about what is going on. Alan also shows his awareness of what is going on today by saying 'she is not going to win.' His saying so indicates that he already has background information about this politician and that he does not think that she is a good candidate. Alan also affirms that he is a registered voter and active in politics. Martha and Alan confirm that some of the residents are still engaged in updating themselves on what is going on in the outside world; by doing so, they participate in the decision making of the country.

A different type of productivity is that some residents use their time trying to help people who live in the outside world to learn a skill. In this case Ximena is a ninety-nine year old resident that provides tutoring to a nine year old boy, Pablo, who lives in the neighborhood.

She [Ximena] says that Pablo, the boy that she is teaching how to read, went to school and taught his classmates the drills [that she taught him during the tutoring session]. She says: "The teacher let him" teach the drills to her students. Ximena says that she asked Pablo: "How did you teach them?" and Pablo said: 'The same way you taught me.'

Ximena proves that she is still a productive member of society because she is teaching Pablo how to read. She is not only helping Pablo, but he "went to school and taught his classmates." Thus members of society in addition to Pablo are being benefited. Since the teacher let him share what he learned, I realize that Pablo's teacher is also aware of the contribution that Ximena is making to Pablo's education. Pablo displays that he is aware of that he is learning a valuable skill from Ximena when he shares the skill with his classmates. Pablo paid attention to the lessons provided by Ximena, which means that her contribution was not a waste of time. As a resident engaged in helping other people learn new skills, Ximena shows her continuing productivity.

Obviously, a retirement home is not a place of seclusion and senility since many residents are still actively and productively involved in the community.

## CONCLUSION

A retirement home does not have to be a place of senility and seclusion since the staff members, together with the residents, can make the environment more like a home in which individuals spend the later stages of their lives. My findings show that Golden Nest is engaged in running their institution so that the residents will be part of their decision making process and also provided with activities promoting social change. By doing so, the institution decreases the stigma attached to retirement homes and also attracts individuals who share a past in social activism. So the residents, together with the institution, produce an environment in which those who live there continue to be engaged in the same activities that they pursued before entering the institution. Since the residents share a common past of fighting for social change, they also practice those ideals inside the institution, for example, by engaging in managing the stigma of the residents whose minds are declining. Many residents of Golden Nest are still engaged in and contributing to the social order.

At Golden Nest, the institution is involved in shifting the negative image that a retirement home suggests into a more positive image of individuals involved in activities promoting social change. As a part of this promotion, the institution allows the residents to participate in its decision-making process which is an unusual procedure in total institutions. Goffman (1959) suggests that in "total institutions" the rules and regulations are already set to be followed by the person that is institutionalized (In Pontell 1999:433). Golden Nest is also an institution which has rules and regulation, but since this retirement home attracts radical individuals, it is run in a democratic manner. I think that residents' participation in the decision-making of an institution is an interesting topic to be explored, but since my time in the field was limited, I was not able to engage in an in-depth exploration of this topic.

I suggest that since the baby boomers are starting to retire, more people should be engaged in doing research on how individuals can maintain meaningful lives during its later stages. It is also important to consider that since a large amount of our population are getting older and people are living longer, our society must reconsider the stereotyping of senility and inactivity that has concerning retirement homes and the elderly.

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