

Real World: Garden Spot Village

Researchers move into retirement community to observe how older adults tick

Christina Olenchek

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The morning of Aug. 8 was a hot, hazy one at Garden Spot Village in New Holland, and a stifling blanket of humidity enveloped the landscape around the eastern Lancaster County retirement community. You might think that on a day like this, most of the residents would be holed up in their air-conditioned homes, munching on shredded wheat while waiting for “The Price is Right” to come on.

You would be wrong.

The place teemed with life. A couple took a stroll down one of the community’s walking paths. Some residents chitchatted in one of Garden Spot’s gathering areas. Another group enjoyed a friendly pool match in the game room.

This is the world that two middle-age researchers entered more than two weeks ago. Bob Fell, 43, and Lori Aulenbach, 47, both of Harrisburg-based marketing firm Varsity, moved to Garden Spot Aug. 1. Their job is to live among the residents for a month to get a real-world view of how marketers and companies can better reach people 55 and older. The demographic represents one of the largest – and one of the most misunderstood – markets for products and services.

“They want more than just walkers. They want more than just wheelchairs,” said Fell, Varsity’s director of strategy and planning. “The reality is that the world is not made for them.”

Fell and Aulenbach are taking a multi-pronged approach to their project, dubbed Project Looking Glass. Much of their research involves hanging out with Garden Spot Village residents as they go about their daily lives. They also interview residents, host discussion sessions and take groups on outings to observe how they interact in different settings, such as restaurants and grocery stores.

Fell conceived Project Looking Glass after speaking at a meeting in Las Vegas. During a speech about marketing to older adults, he asked fellow marketers in the audience to raise their hands if they were younger than 40. About two-thirds of the people raised their hands.



Lori Aulenbach, 47, second from right, laughs with Garden Spot Village residents, from left, Mike Spitzer, Janet Martin and Cordelia MacArthur, at the retirement community in New Holland, Lancaster County. Aulenbach led a discussion group about family, children and grandchildren. Aulenbach, director of research for Harrisburg-based marketing firm Varsity, is living among the residents for a month to learn how marketers and companies can better reach people 55 and older. Varsity researchers use computers, foreground, to transcribe the discussion. Photo/Amy Spangler

“Wow, it struck me that you have no idea what it is like to be an older adult,” Fell said.

Fell and Aulenbach are not doing their work incognito. Garden Spot notified its residents about the project before the researchers moved in. Officials at the retirement community felt that the process would give them and other organizations beneficial information about the needs and preferences of older adults, said Carole J. Deck, Garden Spot’s director of development and public relations. Varsity is not paying to be at Garden Spot.

Many marketers and companies have outdated ideas about how older adults live or what they want from life, said Douglas Friedman, an assistant professor of marketing at Penn State Harrisburg in Middletown, Dauphin County. One misperception is that older adults are set in their ways and are not receptive to new brands. Another is that they are only interested in products such as financial investments, insurance and health services.

“Medical care or dying — that’s what the marketing focus is on,” Friedman said.

Aulenbach learned firsthand that Garden Spot residents have a zest for life that many younger people would not expect. She has a whirlwind schedule packed with activities, such as traveling to Longwood Gardens in Chester County, going to Red Hat Society get togethers and attending a water-volleyball tournament. Some days, she does not get to bed until well after midnight.

“(The residents) want people to know that they’re still a vital part of society,” Aulenbach said.

This spunkiness is apparent in Dorothy Morgan’s voice as she talks about her life at Garden Spot. She has had several discussions with Fell and even invited him to go to church with her one Sunday. He accepted.

The 84-year-old Morgan, originally from Philadelphia, is not afraid to share her opinions. She questions why any of her fellow residents would be offended by a swear word or two in a movie, since they probably have heard much worse during their decades-long lives. She doesn’t understand why some older people let themselves be controlled by their children or grandchildren.

“They’re not running my life,” Morgan said. “I make my own decisions.”

Friedman said he believes that the project will put Varsity in a beneficial position as the marketing world starts to wake up to the potential purchasing power of seniors.

“It’s an unusual tactic, but it’s potentially a very good one,” he said. “It’s a very creative technique.”

Varsity plans to use the research to generate white papers and other educational materials for marketers. A book and a series of speaking engagements also are in the works, Fell said. Among the products residents have requested are easy-to-use cell phones, less dowdy clothing and more user-friendly cereal boxes.

Morgan is curious about how the input of Garden Spot residents is going to change the lives of other older adults.

"I'm interested in what they're going to do with it," she said. "I'd like to read what they come up with."

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About Varsity

Varsity is an offshoot of Pavone, a Harrisburg-based marketing firm.

Pavone has long assisted clients that target older adults, but the firm decided a year ago that it needed a separate entity to best serve that audience, said Bob Fell, Varsity's director of strategy and planning. He holds the same title at Pavone.

"Our approach is to bring great insights and marketing to that audience," Fell said.

The name of the firm came from the world of high-school sports. The varsity team represents the students who are the most mature, educated and experienced, Fell said.

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Home away from home

Bob Fell and Lori Aulenbach left friends and family behind for a month to perform their research at Garden Spot Village in New Holland, Lancaster County. The researchers seem to be handling the transition well.

Fell, who lives in Cumberland County, is married and has three sons. His wife has decided to use his time away to take the children to visit family in Michigan.

"She turned it into a vacation," Fell said. "This would be a lot more difficult otherwise."

Aulenbach said she felt like a college freshman when she moved to Garden Spot. She worried about whether anyone would talk to her or would sit with her at lunch.

Her fears were not realized.

“Everyone has been friendly and welcoming,” she said.

To read a blog about Fell’s and Aulenbach’s experiences at Garden Spot, visit www.varsityone.com.

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