



# Shared Memories

Dawn Stephenson builds  
personal connections for  
residents with her heartfelt  
photo montages

*Dottie and Tony Anthony enjoy reminiscing with the help of a personal photo montage.*

What makes a house a home? Shared warm memories within. The same can be said of a care facility like Virginia Gay Nursing and Rehabilitation, but Director of Quality Services Dawn Stephenson knows those memories aren't always readily available. Her photo montage project has helped bridge the divide for residents, staff, visitors and family.

Dawn uses computer software with mementos provided by residents' families to create a personalized photo collage for each resident. Each tells a unique, warm story, but all have the touch of professionalism you might expect in a published book or greeting card. The page is mounted in a 12" x 12" frame and hung by the resident's door so it is easily taken down for a better look and conversation.

As you go down the hallways, the graphics by every door pull you into a different life. Here is a veteran of WWII, there a teacher and treasured aunt or a farmer on his tractor, and next a volunteer firefighter, colorful images of handmade quilt pieces, immigrant ancestors, children, beloved grandchildren or a favorite pet.

"It is nice to go through these when we visit," Shirley Schwartz said of her mother Florence McGowan's framed photomontage. "There are people she

doesn't get to see in person very often, but we end up 'remembering when,' or talking about all of them and what they are doing now. Mom has always been a people person, always taking care of someone or something, whether it was children, her garden, or her favorite goats and animals on the farm."

"When Dawn asked us for pictures it was hard to pick out which ones to use, there were so many to choose from. Tony's page is mostly family," said his wife Dottie Anthony. "Some are of us as a couple, some are of his work life [Dr. Anthony practiced at Virginia Gay Hospitals and clinics for many years] and service to the community."

"These [photomontages] show the resident's lives as they were. People need to remember that, especially with residents who are non-verbal and non-ambulatory. It is always interesting to hear the stories when someone new comes and it gives visitors and staff something to talk about. Staff quickly becomes family here, and for Tony they always were like family."

Dottie said the montages give CNAs, new nurses and students a way to get to know their patients personally, making caregivers' time at the hospital more rewarding too.

"This is Pat, one of the 65 physician's assistants he supervised over the years," she



says of one photo. "Where ever we went we ran into someone who recognized him from their experience as a resident or on a rotation he supervised. He has lots of memories, he did a lot of different things over his career, like using hypnosis to help people break bad habits, or help athletes gain study habits. He worked with the University of Iowa swimmers teaching relaxation techniques and imaging."

Dottie recognizes that Tony is still a teacher, even as a patient, in his relationships with staff. He worked with many of the nurses here, and even delivered some of them as babies.

Dawn has completed nearly 60 montages, Depending on the number

of photos included, it takes roughly four hours to finish one.

The idea came from a visit to another care facility, where she noticed shelves outside of each room with mementos and knick knacks. She said she liked the idea but wanted something less bulky and more portable, so she called upon her love of scrap booking.

"I wanted people to look at something and be taken back into time with the resident themselves," Dawn said. "It is so important to remember our past, that's what makes us what we are today. Understanding one's past helps us care for people in the present."

"Most of the time when I deliver the photo montages the residents are

overjoyed and can't wait to show everyone. They start talking about this picture or that one, and relate it back to something in their younger days," she said. "One gentleman started to cry as he reminisced with me. He was missing his youth and we sat and talked for quite awhile. Afterwards he thanked me for taking the time to visit with him."

Family members also recognize the photo montages as part of a larger mission at VGH Nursing and Rehabilitation.

"The patients are treated so well," Dottie Anthony said, "with so much respect and love, I wouldn't want Tony to live anywhere else"

*understanding ones past helps us care people in the present.*



## Our gift to you...

I have the honor and privilege of handcrafting these photo montages. I would love to make one especially for you, our newest extended family member.

The only thing required of you or your family is to let me borrow 5-8 photos depicting your life. These photos could be baby pictures, family pictures, wedding pictures, service pictures, favorite hobbies or animals etc. I scan them into the computer and give them back to you once the project is completed.

It is a wonderful conversation piece that initiates interactions not only

between the resident and staff but expands to family and friends as well. I can not begin to tell you how much happiness is displayed by the residents when they see the finished product!

The photo montage is our gift to you as part of coming to VGH. We ask that they be displayed outside the resident's entrance to their new room.

Thank you,

**Dawn Stephenson, RN**  
Coordinator of Quality/Medical Services  
Virginia Gay Nursing & Rehab