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For seniors, never too late to dream

By Stephanie Farr
STAFF WRITER

HENRY ALLHISER, 82, fell in love with Lady Gaga while watching her concerts on HBO at the Wesley Enhanced Living retirement community in Upper Moreland.

He dreamed of seeing the pop star play live — or even meeting her — but he had no real hope of doing so. He hadn't been to a concert since he saw John Denver perform decades ago.

But Allhiser told his dream to a staffer at Wesley and in September found himself at the Wells Fargo Center, wiping tears from his face as he watched Lady Gaga perform his favorite song, "Born This Way."

Even though a social-media campaign to get Allhiser a meeting with Lady Gaga didn't work out, he still called the show "the best experience I've ever had."

"I broke up. It was heartwarming because I didn't think they would honor something that weird," Allhiser said. "They didn't have to do that — and they're not just doing it for me. They're doing other people's wishes, too."

As you wish

For the last two years, the staff at Wesley, headquartered in Warminster, has been granting the wishes of senior residents across its six retirement communities in the Philadelphia area under a program called WEL (Wesley Enhanced Living) Wishes.

"We want our residents to wake up with purpose and look forward to their day," said Lisa Haino, director of marketing for Wesley. "Just because you're aging doesn't mean you stop living."

Wish recipients are typically nominated by staffers, who lis-



One of the WEL Wishes being granted at Wesley Enhanced Living: Delores Salamone uses a virtual reality headset to visit Sicily with friend Richard Tessmer. YONG KIM / Staff Photographer



Henry Allhiser, 82, (left) went to a Lady Gaga concert. Nettie Weiss got her ears pierced just before her 100th birthday. Bill Grun, 98, operated construction equipment at Diggerland. Wesley Enhanced Living



ten closely for hints while talking with residents. The seniors can also apply to have their wishes fulfilled.

"Everybody has a story, but sometimes you get so wrapped up in the everyday you don't really think about what that is," Haino said. "But then they come up with these wishes and they're re-

ally inspiring. You see the talents they have and we get to learn about the residents' background."

The wishes have ranged from those so heart-pounding they require a doctor's clearance, like skydiving or a trip to Terror Behind the Walls at Eastern State Penitentiary, to the small but im-



measurably meaningful.

One 91-year-old resident dreamed of showing his watercolor paintings at an art show, so the staff hung up his work and hosted a black-tie opening. Lionel Croll, 94, dreamed of singing opera, so the staff arranged for him to do a public performance with a professional opera singer.

And then there was 99-year-old Nettie Weiss, whose wish was simply to get her ears pierced again, so that on her 100th birthday she could wear a pair of earrings her husband had given her before he died.

Getting creative

With more people living longer in retirement, individuals need to plan for post-work life both financially and psychologically, said Katherine E. Galluzzi, a geriatrics professor at the Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine and board chair for the Philadelphia Corporation for the Aging. They must think about what's going to provide meaning, variety, and a reason to stay alive.

It is a challenge faced by many retirees — and many retirement communities.

"I think a program like this is fantastic; to be able to fulfill simple goals or wishes is great," Galluzzi said.

Sometimes, the staff has to get creative. At a recent town hall at Wesley's Germantown facility, Delores Salamone, 82, said she wanted to go to Sicily, the homeland of her father's family.

But a trip to Sicily was not in the WEL Wishes budget. So last week, the staff improvised. They got a virtual reality headset and downloaded 360-degree YouTube videos of Sicily.

"Oh wow! This is beautiful. ... There's the sun shining on the sea," Salamone said as she took the virtual tour, pointing at what only she could see. "Now we're back in town. ... They got graffiti in Sicily?! ... There's a Coke machine. Can you believe that? ... Hey, this looks like the Italian Market on Ninth Street!"

After her tour, the culinary crew prepared a Sicilian meal

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for Salamone and an Italian opera singer serenaded her. She seemed equally flattered and embarrassed by the attention.

But above all, she smiled — a lot — that day.

'They blew my mind'

While other bucket-list wish programs exist for seniors across the country, Haino said Wesley's program wasn't based on another model. It is unusual in that it allows people an unlimited number of wishes.

Take 98-year-old Bill Grun, who has been the recipient of three WEL Wishes over the last two years: He led a 9.5-mile group bicycle ride of 30 strangers from the Central Bucks Bicycle Club; he caught a ride in a Doylestown fire truck and sounded the siren; and he operated heavy construction equipment at Diggerland Construction Theme Park, where he got to crush a small bus.

"They blew my mind -and then the following year they blew my mind again," Grun said of the staff who helped grant his wishes.

Grun, who taught industrial arts for 33 years, still teaches Sunday school and a summer woodworking class, and is an avid reader. He said "it's embarrassing" that people think what he does is exceptional just because of his age.

"There are an awful lot of people who never set goals for themselves. They come here to wait for the undertaker," he said. "But I think he's way off."

Grun said he feels "so blessed" that Wesley keeps finding ways to help him fulfill his wildest dreams.

And he's already planning his next wish — to retake a college-level calculus course, just to prove he can still do it.

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