

EDUCATION NEWS

Laurie Cashman, Director of Education

“There is an elegance in bravely facing the challenges that life offers head on. Seeing the onslaught of arrows and storms, but still pushing forward, the wind and rain pelting against your face, fear and doubt seeping in your heart, but leaning into it anyway. Feeling fearful but determined to take another courageous step forward into the unknown.” Gregory S. Williams, author

In looking back over the past eleven months, I’m mindful of the paradoxes that have revealed themselves to us during these times. As our work has taken on an almost frantic pace, our lives have slowed down. We’ve been forced to embrace the notion of maintaining distance, with the goal of being together when the pandemic is over. As we have implemented measures required to keep us apart physically, we have been brought closer together in spirit and resolve. In an effort to keep people well by limiting exposure to the virus, we have contributed to the health challenges brought about as a result of social isolation. We look forward to a new normal, but fail to realize that “normal” is merely an illusion as we live in a constant state of change. The challenges we’ve faced have threatened to reduce us, but instead we’ve grown from them.

As someone who spends much of her time thinking about education, how people learn, how people grow, and how to empower and enable people to increase the quality of life for others, I find myself searching for lessons to be learned from the past year. Although a global pandemic was expected to occur at some point, most of us were truly unprepared to deal with what would be required of us in response to it.

Our recent Dementia Training focused on the challenges we deal with in caring for a marginalized segment of our population and with the isolation that comes from many different sources. One goal of the training was to highlight some of the issues that contribute to social isolation among those with dementia; however, those very issues also affect the older adult population as a whole. Cultural differences, issues surrounding sexual orientation and gender identity, isolation and loneliness caused by social distancing, and the mere process of aging and its accompanying limitations threaten to further isolate individuals who are already at risk of being marginalized. The main goal of the training was to nurture a culture of inclusivity and diversity in assisted living.

In the coming year, Mass-ALA will offer educational events that will provide assisted living professionals opportunities to learn how to mitigate the challenges that accompany aging, but we will not be doing this in a vacuum. Everything we offer will be viewed through a broad lens of inclusivity and diversity. Educating assisted living professionals will involve a conscious awareness and focus on creating an environment of hospitality, warmth, sensitivity, and inclusivity, all while maintaining a focus on best practices in providing the highest quality care possible in the assisted living environment.

We have learned a great deal as a result of our experience with COVID-19, but I believe we are still in the early stages of the lessons offered by working through this difficult time in history. In looking back at the Spanish flu, which claimed millions of lives in the early 1900’s, I wonder how many of us can call to mind the details of it. As a single event, it claimed more lives than each war in that century, but society doesn’t seem to consider it to be as noteworthy. For what it’s worth, my own theory is that,

because the enemy was invisible, it was difficult to see the “good vs. evil” of it in the way that other tragedies have made that contrast so clear and the events so memorable. My hope is that as we navigate through the coming days, we will see only the good in others, refusing to acknowledge any reference to evil. We are all on the same team with this one. We have many opportunities to encourage one another, show love and compassion, be creative in ways to brighten the days of others, and appreciate the time we have together in ways that we may not have in the past. May we have this experience indelibly etched in our minds for the good we have seen in others, in spite of the heart-wrenching tragedy.

Finding ourselves currently in the midst of a resurgence of COVID-19, many are getting weary. Battle fatigue is real and we must take care to keep our resolve intact as we enter the holiday season and the winter months. As Margaret Thatcher once said, “You may have to fight a battle more than once to win it.” The assisted living industry can take credit for managing the virus well in the early months, but we can’t falter at this point. There is too much at stake. I encourage you to stay the course, fight the good fight, and take care of yourselves as best you can.

As we plan our educational events for the coming year, please feel free to reach out to me at lcashman@mass-ala.org with any thoughts or suggestions on how we might better meet your current and future training and education needs.

Wishing you all a hopeful 2021 filled with many opportunities for growth and joy.

Laurie