My time spent at Chris Jensen Health & Rehabilitation Center
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I chose to volunteer at Chris Jensen Health and Rehabilitation Center for my experiential activity. I was at Chris Jensen during the evening of Friday, March 14th and again on Saturday, March 15th during the afternoon. I spent four hours there, including two mealtimes.

Background - Why I chose Chris Jensen

When this class began and I read the syllabus, this was the option for the experiential activity that stuck out the most. Prior to moving to Duluth, I was active in volunteering my time for different things. My grandmother passed away in July 2013, and I have found myself missing not only her but also her no-nonsense take on the world, something that I think is a coming of age type of wisdom. I have always enjoyed spending time with the elderly and got my Nurse Assistant certification in high school. Volunteering at Chris Jensen provided the opportunity to give a little of my time to an aging population that I enjoy spending time with.

While preparing for this experiential activity I found it difficult to connect with a volunteer coordinator at the nursing homes I contacted in Duluth. I thought it was interesting how few phone messages and emails were returned, considering I wanted to freely volunteer my time. Chris Jensen was accommodating to my availability and communicative; I really appreciated this.
The People I Served

I was given a tour of the facility when I arrived at Chris Jensen, including the memory care unit. After this, I went through two long-term care wings and asked all the residents what they would like to eat for supper. During this time I was able to briefly chat with many residents and later connect more during the meal. What stood out to me over anything was how powerless we are over many of life’s circumstances.

The residents I met are generations older than I am and no longer live independently, but we still share in our humanity. I can’t imagine anyone picturing their late years confined to a wheelchair, with slurred speech from a stroke, or any of the other health issues that come with old age. We share the hope to age gracefully, with peace and dignity until our last day. Some residents were unable to feed themselves or lacked the ability to perform other activities of daily living. I found myself feeling grateful that while my grandmother’s last days were in a hospital, she had dignity and independence until her last breath. What else can we ask for at the end of life?

Justice, Equity, and Fairness

Chris Jensen is a for-profit 170 bed nursing home that accepts Medicare and Medicaid. According to a US World News rating system, they only have two out of five stars in terms of quality and safety measures (US World News). It seems unfair that some individuals will spend their last years in a facility that rates only two out of five stars while others might experience a higher quality of life at a facility with a higher rating.
Racial Equality

While touring the facility, assisting with two meals, and spending time with residents, I noticed that everyone I interacted with was similar to me in that they were white and possibly middle class. Is this a reflection of Duluth’s population? Is the resident make up of Chris Jensen a mirror image of this generation’s racial makeup in Duluth? If not, where do Duluth’s non-white citizens spend their aging years?

Income and Accessibility

During lunch one gentleman told me about his work history in Duluth and shared that one thing he misses most about independent living is cooking in his own kitchen. He especially liked making his own barbeque sauces and marinades. In our conversation he advised me to legally will my home to someone else when I get older. He shared that the state of Minnesota had taken his home in order to cover his bills at Chris Jensen when he ran out of savings. He seemed to have a lot of acceptance of this situation, as he was able to talk about it openly over his lunch. I wonder though, is Chris Jensen a place for aging folks with nowhere else to go? Does income preclude anyone from skilled nursing care in later years? Further, what does the white demographic of Chris Jensen and this man’s story have in common? Does this point to a larger issue of minority home ownership and the ability to even provide collateral for skilled nursing care?

Misconceptions and Perceptions about Chris Jensen

Having worked in a nursing home in high school, I was aware that it might be uncomfortable to see a patient struggling with a simple task such as moving about in a wheel
It has been many years since I was in this environment and I still found it difficult to see the living situation of some residents.

On their website Chris Jensen features a local television commercial (Chris Jensen Health and Rehabilitation Center). The commercial shows residents who stay at Chris Jensen only for a short period of time before returning home. They highlight private rooms with a kitchenette, resembling a hotel room. None of the rooms or floors I visited looked this way. There were usually two residents to a room with a curtain dividing their space and each slept in a hospital-type bed. In the commercial many of the residents were received personal attention, giving the impression that the residents had care at their disposal. In my limited time at Chris Jensen, I witnessed multiple residents sitting idly for hours, only interacting with staff to request restroom assistance. Going into my time at Chris Jensen, I was expecting to interact in a setting more like the commercial.

**How I Perceive Chris Jensen**

I don’t know what regulations Chris Jensen is subject to, but I found some of the rooms to be disorganized and possibly hazardous to enter or exit in case of an emergency. This is possibly a safety concern considering the number of residents who are wheelchair bound or are not independently mobile.

Compared to my life, I have autonomy over the quality and safety of my living space. After seeing the rooms and noticing how rushed the staff was, I would not want a loved one to live at Chris Jensen beyond a short rehabilitation stay, nor would I want to spend my last years there. I walked away from this experience knowing that the small life choices I make today will impact my health in later years. This solidified the importance of not smoking, getting regular exercise, and making healthy food choices. These are three things that I have the most control
over if I want healthy geriatric years. I can also work hard to save for retirement and long term care costs.

Getting to Know the Residents

Most of my time was spent during the lunch and dinner mealtimes. I took meal orders and sat with the residents while they ate. This gave me the opportunity to get to know a number of residents’ backgrounds without being intrusive.

My favorite conversation was after lunch on Saturday. Two women stayed in the dining area and told me about their children and their lives as wives and mothers. They both reflected on the accomplishments of their children as their own greatest accomplishment in life. They were also both very up to date on current events and things happening around Duluth.

Future Volunteering at Chris Jensen

Volunteering at Chris Jensen solidified for me how much I enjoy working with the elderly. However, with working full time and being in graduate school I don’t foresee myself returning to this site to volunteer outside of a course requirement. While I was searching for an experiential activity, I found an organization that is looking for individuals to visit with the elderly in their homes. Unfortunately this organization requires regular time commitment; otherwise I would have loved to try this. While I don’t see myself returning to Chris Jensen, I would like to pursue other avenues to work with this generation again.

Summary

During my tour of Chris Jensen, we encountered a man in the hall of a long term care unit. He was struggling to maneuver down the hall in a wheelchair using only his legs to move
along. The volunteer coordinator said hello, and asked how his day was. He said, “It sure is a good day.”

I can sometimes feel frustrated when life doesn’t unfold according to my expectations. This feeling of frustration can seem trivial in light of some of the things I observed at Chris Jensen. This man is losing his mobility and independence, has been outside little during the winter, and is living in questionable quarters. At the same time he thinks it’s a good day just to be alive.

Despite my misgivings about the facility and possible racial and income inequalities, I was reminded that my attitudes and perceptions are an important daily choice. My time at Chris Jensen also solidified my vision for what I do and do not want my last years to look like.
Works Cited
