UNCW interns help out at Trinity Grove

By Kate Scarry
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On April 5 at Trinity Grove, the recreation therapy team was in high gear getting ready for “Family Feud.” Under the guidance of director Amanda Powell, the activities room was transformed into a game show, complete with music, lights, and buzzers. A few hours later, residents felt feeling stimulated, happy and connected.

Feud organizers including Powell, her assistant Lindsey Martin and their three interns — Breanna Campbell, Molly Brown, and Carissa Abramowski — are all products of the University of North Carolina Wilmington’s popular recreation therapy program.

The program has found a perfect venue in Trinity Grove for students to escape the classroom and get valuable hands-on experience. Having the interns around is also good for residents, who benefit not only from the interns’ therapy skills but their enthusiasm.

Dr. Candy Ashton, head of UNCW’s recreation therapy program, and Dr. Daniel Johnson, a professor in the program, believe non-traditional skilled nursing facilities like Trinity Grove are causing students to think differently about careers in long-term care. When Johnson takes classes to Trinity Grove to practice doing assessments, he sees preconceptions melting away.

“As students leave, they’re smiling and positive – and that’s not always the case when they visit a long-term care place,” he said. “They see a community model – as opposed to a medical model – that works, and they see how personalized that is for people.”

The home’s decision to hire a licensed recreational therapist instead of an activities director makes the focus not “birthday parties and bingo,” Johnson said, but the residents’ whole lifestyle and functional abilities.

The difference between recreation therapy and simple “activities” is that recreation therapy is goal-oriented, Powell says. For example, if a resident is having problems with balance, a Wii gaming system might be incorporated into a therapy plan.

UNCW’s program has grown rapidly since Powell graduated in 2008, going from 75 majors to about 150, Ashton says. An award in 2010 from the American Therapeutic Recreation Association gave the program a boost of exposure.

Although national certification in the field requires only five courses, UNCW’s recreation therapy major requires 12 content courses, including work in anatomy and physiology, and also offers specialty courses in assistance dogs and aquatic therapy. Graduates are prepared to work in various settings, from hospitals to camps to nursing homes.
Trinity Grove, opened in 2011 by the nonprofit Lutheran Services Carolinas at 631 Junction Creek Drive, uses interns year-round, said Powell, who has supervised three this semester.

Ashton says UNCW is hoping to take the relationship with Trinity Grove a step further and actually teach a course there within the next year or two.

Katie Scarvey is communications specialist with Lutheran Services Carolinas.

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