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Vernon Manor's Ingrid Constalie to retire

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After 36 years as the activity director at Vernon Manor, Ingrid Constalie is planning to retire. It goes without saying, she has seen a lot of change and known many people in that time. She shares a few memories;

“I was interviewed by the administrator and all of the trustees; Myrt Jacobson, Mose Marshall, Clair Wakefield, Art Theige and county board chair Chet Erlandson. When Mr. Theige was visiting someone at the Manor not long before his death, I had the

opportunity to let him know I was still working and thank him for taking a chance on me. I'm grateful for that.



I started work in an empty office with no orientation or much of anything else.

It was up to me to figure things out. It took me years. Now I can truthfully say they gave the job, but I made it my life's work creating a meaningful and rewarding career. In 1983 there were 120 residents with a waiting list. There was no such thing as a short term stay. It was not uncommon for people to live for 5-15 years or more in a nursing home. A few who had been in Mendota or the asylum had actually been institutionalized since their teens or early adulthood, 30-40 years or more. Today we struggle to maintain a census of half the original due to so many other living options. The majority of residents were fairly independent and ambulatory and there were no electric wheelchairs or scooters. We still had about 25 former residents from the asylum.

They were an interesting group of individuals! Many of them were relocated into the community when the regulations changed in 1990. We had ash- trays on all the tables in the activity room so residents could smoke while they had coffee. Even my staff could smoke while they worked! That was one of the first things to go. There was also a power table saw in a woodworking shop and a pool table. The saw went first, but neither were used much.

Technology slowly seeped in. My first calendars were hand written and all documentation was done in longhand. We showed reel to reel 16mm films ordered and picked up from the library to crowds of over forty. These were like 'Flash the Teenage Otter' not real 'movies'. I've used every kind of camera including an instamatic with a flashcube, a polaroid, a huge shoulder held video cam, 35mm and digital. A computer was placed in the activity room in 2010 for resident use, but we eventually had it taken out when everyone was bringing their own. Our groups were huge. Easily ninety would show up for a special event. A picnic took days of planning and would involve half the building. We prepared and packed up all the food depending on the mini bus and volunteers for transportation. Maybe we took a few wheelchairs, but not many because most everyone walked unassisted. Some would even stretch out on the grass in the park! Many memorable trips involved an old red beater station wagon that would fit three in front and four in the back. It stalled a lot. I remember driving to the daycare, loading up kids in the backend and hauling them back so they could spend some time with the residents! No seat belts back then!

We hosted some very unique events. A couple in their 80's renewed their wedding vows. She carried a bouquet and we served a decorated tiered cake. A baptism was held in the dining room so that the great grandparents could be involved. We planned a fairly elaborate parade of wedding gowns involving residents, staff & friends that was really fun. The conference room and administrator's office was used as the changing area! A wedding held in the back yard was magical, but one of my most endearing memories is when the staff participated in a surprise mock wedding for a resident and his wife for their anniversary. That was a hoot with everyone getting into character.

Soon I realized that combining young people with our residents would be win-win so I collaborated with the Viroqua teachers on a few groups.

The first teacher I worked with was A.C. Fortney. It was a success so I expanded it to include Westby classes as well providing the children and residents with a special intergenerational experience. There have been many wonderful programs involving a large number of students of all ages from around the county. That has been a really satisfying accomplishment.

I joined the regional and state (Wisconsin Representatives of Activity Professionals) professional groups for support and continuing education early on and I think it was hugely beneficial. This is very important as the regulations and the needs of the residents change. I was nominated to the state board in 2014 and have represented the Western region since then. Participating on the WRAP board was an empowering experience providing me with many opportunities for personal and professional growth. I really enjoyed being the Government Relations chair for four years collecting and sharing current trends and data with the membership through conference presentations. In 2015 I was honored to be elected WRAP's Vice President and began representing Wisconsin at the national level.

Although certification is not required by regulation in my position yet, it is very helpful, so I did pursue several as they became available. In 2007 I became certified as a Dementia Specialist through the Alzheimer's Association and in 2012 I achieved Board Certification as an Activity Professional, that was grandfathered to Advanced Activity Professional this year. Dementia Care has always been a passion, so in 2017 I took one more step completing Certified Dementia Practitioner training through the National Council of Certified Dementia Practitioners in Denver. Graduating from the Wisconsin Women's Network Policy Institute in 2018 provided a different type of training and experience in policy & legislative procedures. I am hoping to use my knowledge in dementia care and advocacy in the future as our county and state move forward in educating others & creating dementia friendly communities.

For many years I kept scrapbooks, but not so much these past few years. I have a lot of 'still frames in my mind' and so many wonderful, touching memories. There have been difficulties; sad and challenging times, but I've learned and moved on. The joy and

satisfaction I've received far outweigh any of that. What's been important are the people and relationships. Over the years I've worked with generations of families & residents, scores of teachers, clergy and musicians, other professionals and some very special co-workers. They will always be a part of me. Now, I'm ready for a change. I've had an amazing career, one that has made a difference, and for that I am grateful."

An informal open house in Constalie's honor will be held at Vernon Manor from 2-3:30 p.m. on Wednesday, July 24. All are welcome.