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Silva students starts special volunteer organization to help, spend time with senior citizens at nursing homes

EL PASO, TEXAS — While other students spent their summer hanging out with friends, Silva Health Magnet senior Juan Pablo Speer spent his time at local nursing homes, visiting residents and playing his violin.

Speer was not visiting family or working a summer job. The dedicated student was at the nursing homes as part of Visiting the Lonely Birds, a group he created to link teens like himself with seniors living in assisted-living communities.

The group is dedicated to enriching the lives of nursing home residents, while providing volunteers, many of whom are future health care professionals, invaluable patient care training.

“I wanted to do something to help the community,” he said. “The organization was originally intended to be a summer project, but after I saw the impact it was having on the residents and volunteers, I knew we had to keep going.”

Visiting the Lonely Birds, or VLB for short, teamed up with the Double T Health Professions Honor Society at Silva to continue the program beyond the summer. The group also gives participating students the chance to boost volunteer and community service hours.

VLB students currently volunteer at seven assisted-living facilities in El Paso.

“It’s been an amazing experience,” Speer said. “The residents start to remember a lot more about when they were our age, sharing their stories with us. One of the residents I visit with at the Alzheimer’s facility lived in Germany during World War II, so she’s always telling me about her father and how he was a painter.”

Speer visited residents up to four times a week during the summer. Now that school is in full swing, he uses his time in between classes designing a website, organizing volunteers and preparing for weekend visits.

“I really enjoy playing music for the residents. They always ask me to play one song or the other,” Speer said. “I learn certain songs so I can come back and play it for them. ‘Over the Waves’ is always a favorite. It’s a waltz they like a lot.”

VLB volunteers spend time with residents, partaking in fun activities or just keeping them company.

The group, for example, is helping the Legacy at Cimarron facility organize a mystery dinner theater, making costumes and creating a festive atmosphere for the residents.

Silva senior Karen Robleto joined the group to get high-school community service hours, but kept volunteering long after she had met requirements.

“When I heard about it, I was like ‘hey, I need volunteer hours.’ It has become much more than volunteer hours,” she said. “I have already exceeded the amount I need, but I keep going because I love it. Walking in and seeing their smiling faces just makes me so happy.”

Robleto spends her time playing different games with residents.

“We play cards and dominoes, but mostly we play virtual bowling. They love it,” she said. “I hope more people get involved because I want them to feel the same way I do.”

Speer wants the group will continue thrive, even after he graduates and goes to college. He is already setting up coordinators at each of the seven facilities to ensure the visits continue.

“I am hoping the Double T’s will keep sending students. It is difficult to leave your loved ones for someone else to care for and that is completely understandable,” he said. “I want them to see that the community cares about these residents, and that we are there to make sure they feel valued and appreciated.”

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