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ODU recreational therapy students build connections with older adults at Harbor's Edge



Old Dominion University recreational therapy student Kiana Burton works with Sue Kesler, 96, while playing a memory game at Harbor's Edge, an assisted living and retirement community in Norfolk, on Tuesday. (Kendall Warner/The Virginian-Pilot)

Elijah "Eli" James presented Stanley Sacks with a certificate naming him "The Most Inspiring" resident at Harbor's Edge.

Kiana Burton nominated Sue Kesler for her "Most Compassionate Heart."

Anayah Gibson deemed Bill Whitehurst the "Most Likely to be a Ladies' Man."

James, Burton and Gibson are college seniors studying recreational therapy at Macon & Joan Brock Virginia Health Sciences at Old Dominion University. Sacks, 103; Kesler, 96; and Whitehurst, 100; are residents of the Norfolk retirement community.

Whitehurst is a former U.S. representative and retired ODU lecturer.

The Gen Zers and members of the Greatest and Silent generations may never have met if it wasn't for the senior wellness program run by Shelly Beaver, a senior lecturer at ODU.

Beaver, along with ODU students, and Tori Stafford, Harbor's Edge life enrichment manager, coordinated a beach-themed celebration Tuesday in the facility's town hall space to mark the conclusion of this year's program.

"It's opened my eyes as to how universal some of the skills that we learned in recreational therapy are," James said. "It was such a pleasure to interact with Stanley."



Old Dominion University recreational therapy student Elijah James takes a sea-themed photo with Stanley Sacks, 103, during an afternoon of enrichment at Harbor's Edge, an assisted living and retirement community, in Norfolk on Tuesday, Dec. 9, 2025. (Kendall Warner/The Virginian-Pilot)

James called Sacks, who at 100 was then the oldest and longest-practicing attorney in Virginia, "phenomenal" and "awesome."

In turn, Sacks showered James with words of praise and his stamp of approval: "I liked our conversations."

Beaver started the senior wellness program in Pennsylvania before bringing it to Hampton Roads in 2017. It began at Virginia Beach's Beth Sholom Village — now known as Maimonides Health Center — but stopped during the height of the pandemic.

Beaver initiated it at Harbor's Edge in 2021, and it's been going strong ever since.

This year, 17 students participated, heading to the high-rise retirement home at Fort Norfolk for an hour every Tuesday and Thursday during the fall semester. Next year, Beaver anticipates there will be more than 30 students.

The program is beneficial in many ways, but especially for resident engagement and student learning, Stafford said.

The immersive learning experience enables students to step into the job of a recreational therapist by working directly with the geriatric population. In turn, the program also tears down what may be preconceived ageist attitudes.

“It’s a high impact, educational practice that allows them to apply what they’ve been learning in class,” Beaver said. “We can teach all the concepts; we can teach them what dementia looks like and how to work with older adults, but this enables them to actually do and see.”

Throughout the semester, students work with their matched residents, conducting informal assessments and one-on-one activities along with group sessions. They plan, implement and evaluate the success of the program and their resident’s progress.



And they also form meaningful connections.

“It reinforced the values I already have for older people,” Burton said. “I respect them a lot; I know they carry wisdom and the capacity to still grow.”

And she said she hopes to visit Kesler for many days to come.

Kesler’s daughter, also named Susan, said her mother, who uses a wheelchair, was a bit reluctant at first, but said the program has enhanced and enriched her life.

G. William “Bill” Whitehurst, 100 years old and a former U.S. representative, celebrates his superlative given to him by an Old Dominion University recreational therapy student during an afternoon of enrichment at Harbor's Edge, an assisted living and retirement community, in Norfolk on Tuesday, Dec. 9, 2025. (Kendall Warner/The Virginian-Pilot)

“My mother really does enjoy her time with Kiana,” Kesler

said. “It gets her out of her room and the socialization has been wonderful for her.”