

Volunteers of America: An Authorized Validation Organization

FORTY YEARS AGO, VOLUNTEERS OF AMERICA COMMITTED TO SERVING THE CARE NEEDS OF INCREASING NUMBERS OF AGING PERSONS WITH THE OPENING OF MAPLEWOOD CARE CENTER, A SKILLED NURSING FACILITY IN ST. PAUL, MINN. TODAY, WE CONTINUE THIS COMMITMENT BY PROVIDING HOUSING, HOME CARE, ADULT DAY CARE, ASSISTED LIVING, TRANSITIONAL AND REHABILITATIVE CARE, PACE AND LONG-TERM SKILLED CARE AND SERVICES TO THOUSANDS OF SENIOR PERSONS EACH YEAR IN SEVERAL STATES. LONG-TERM CARE DELIVERY HAS EVOLVED SINCE THE FIRST NURSING HOMES WERE BUILT, PARTICULARLY IN THE SPECIALTY OF CARING FOR PERSONS WITH DEMENTIA.

In those early years, best practice was to use “reality orientation” as a means to bring the impaired person out of memories into the here and now. This accepted practice had caregivers telling those suffering with dementia in their care such things as, “No, you can’t see your husband now. Remember? He passed away five years ago. You live here with us now.” This approach was not only ineffective, but it almost always elevated frustration and emotional distress.

Fortunately, an enlightened woman with a pioneer spirit saw the need for a new approach. Meet Naomi Feil, developer of Validation, a method for communicating with severely disoriented, “old-old” people.

Naomi Feil

Born in Munich in 1932, Feil grew up in the Montefiore Home for the Aged in Cleveland, Ohio, where her father was the administrator, and her mother, the head of the social services department.

“There was no professional social worker in the homes for the aged at that time,” said Feil. “My father, a psychologist, brought his expertise from working with children to the home and helped to pioneer rehabilitation for the elderly. In those days, directors of such homes lived on the premises with their families. I woke up every morning and opened the door to greet my friends, the old people. I loved being with them, and I got to know them very well. But back then, it was thought when people went to a home they should just sit and rock.”



After graduating with a master's degree in social work from Columbia University, Feil began working with the elderly. She published her first book, "Validation: The Feil Method," in 1982 and another book, "The Validation Breakthrough," in 2002. Feil is the executive director of the Validation Training Institute and a popular speaker in North America, Europe and Asia. Recently, she made a presentation on her Validation method in Capetown, South Africa.

"My group work as a field instructor with what I then called 'disoriented old people' led me to discover that old-old people used people in present time to represent people in their past,"

said Feil. "This is how they get out the many emotions they have kept inside. And with each person in my group, as I got to know each individual better, I gradually developed an understanding for why they did what they did in this elder stage of life."

The Validation method trains professional and personal caregivers who interact with confused older adults. The Validation Specialist tunes into the person's inner world by helping him or her to restore the past, reliving good times and resolving past conflicts. Feil explained why communicating with people with dementia is both life-changing and a moral imperative.

“My philosophy is that as human beings, we are connected to each other,” Feil said. “There is a humanity that binds us together that has nothing to do with religion or race or culture. When people get very old, they go back to this basic humanity, and you can reach that person on an emotional level.”

Feil believes that if the elder is left all alone and there is no connection with another human being, the elder will deteriorate, withdraw and become “a living dead person.” Validation enables us to understand what the elder, who no longer has the power of speech, needs to express in order to move on in peace.

Dave Nilson, a Volunteers of America professional caregiver, has followed Feil’s work for decades. He recalled the first time he saw Feil in action. “In 1982, I was at a nursing home convention and heard Naomi Feil talk about the Validation method for the first time. She talked about empathetic listening, mirroring, meeting the resident where they were at . . . and although I didn’t totally understand the method, I instinctively knew this was better. A couple of years later, I read a book she had written and heard her speak once again. I was certain this was what we as professional caregivers should be doing in our nursing homes and other types of aging care facilities. In the early ‘90s, I began work at a memory care unit where I always spoke about Naomi and the Validation method, hoping that someday we would move our delivery of care in that direction.”

Like Nilson, many of the Volunteers of America caregiving specialists are attuned to the importance of finding better ways to serve those suffering with dementia. Feil’s Validation model of care complements Volunteers of America’s commitment to serving those in need with dignity and respect.

“This is an exciting time for Volunteers of America as the Validation method is going to forever change the delivery of care for our clients with dementia,” said Nilson. “As an Authorized Validation Organization, we will now be able to offer certification classes at worker and group leader levels. It also gives us access to a variety of products and information based on the copyrighted works of Naomi Feil. But more importantly, Volunteers of America will be able to educate our professionals in the field, while growing and expanding our ability to provide the best care possible for a growing number of cognitively impaired adults in our own facilities across the country.”

Serving an Aging America

The integrating of the Validation method into Volunteers of America’s current programs for elder care also advances the organization’s Aging with Options™ initiative. This initiative recognizes that with today’s advancements in health care and special emphasis on preventive care, older Americans are experiencing a future of better health and longevity. The organization is committed to older Americans by ensuring them that no matter what stage of aging, no

matter what state of health, Volunteers of America can offer the right support at the right time, coordinating all the care and support necessary to meet each individual’s needs one by one, helping people maintain dignity, respect, independence and self-sufficiency. Through an integrated network of committed and compassionate professionals, Volunteers of America provides choices and support through each phase of life’s journey.

“If you’re all alone, you feel worthless,” said Feil. “Deep down inside you have to recreate your identity all by yourself. . . through movements, through self-gratification; but if someone enters into your world, and you look at them, and you communicate with them, there is a wholeness that comes about; there is a relief; there is a feeling ‘I am wanted! I am needed! I am complete!’ There’s completeness when two human beings really care about each other. And I feel that when I connect with an old person. It gives me energy. It makes me feel ‘Wow, I am a real human being and I feel good about myself.’ And it makes that other person feel the same way.”

Volunteers of America looks forward to the future as we journey into the world of those with dementia offering a new way to help, support and provide the respect and dignity that all people deserve.

For questions and information regarding Validation certification, training or upcoming events, please contact Dave Nilson at dnilson@voa.org or info@voavalidation.org.

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