

Independence Manor means 'family' to nursing assistant



Staff photo by David Bruneau

Pedro Salas, right, talks with Lewis Zande, one of his 'fans' at Independence Manor

By Orla Swift
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Pedro Salas grew up in a large family. As an employee of Independence Manor health care facility, Salas' "family" has grown even bigger, encompassing hundreds of residents and employees at the facility.

It is this feeling of family that earned Salas the honor of being named the facility's first Circle of Care Employee of the Year, according to Howard Reitman, the administrator of Independence Manor.

"He always tells us, 'Don't worry. Be happy,'" Lewis Zande, 93, said of Salas, a certified nursing assistant at the facility for 14 years. Salas is Zande's unofficial groomer because nobody else seems to give him a shave or comb his hair quite as well, he said.

"He's a good man," said Zande. "A very busy man."

"When I first came here, he was the one who took care of me," said George Watts, 92, another resident. "I know Pedro better than my own family. That's a fact."

"He's a good fellow," said Watts. "He treats me all right. Pedro's a good man."

Circle of Care is a training program in social skills developed by Health Care & Retirement Corporation of Toledo, Ohio, which owns Independence Manor. Although Independence Manor employees have yet to go through the new program, Reitman said he thought it would be a nice idea to begin rewarding employees who have already displayed the people-skills embodied in the program.

"When you meet him, there's a warmth about him," said Reitman. "He communicates that."

The Circle of Care ideal, rather than focusing solely on an employee's interpersonal skills with patients, stresses the importance of being adept at dealing with patients' families, other employees, ambulance workers and even officials such as state inspectors.

Through videotapes, skits and written exercises, Circle of Care trainees explore different ways they could react to different work-related situations. They also learn

about patients' rights, human rights, emotions, morals and ethics.

Salas was chosen from 15 nominees representing different departments and shifts at the facility, Reitman said.

Certified nursing aide June Rogers, who attended several Circle of Care training seminars at another HCR-owned facility to familiarize herself with the program, said Salas is a model Circle of Care employee.

"He's good toward fellow workers," said Rogers, who has worked at Independence Manor for 16 years. "He cares, and he takes very good care of the residents. And there's something to be done. Pedro is always the first to volunteer. He's a vision of giving and caring."

Reitman is sending two Independence Manor employees to a training seminar at HCR headquarters in Ohio next week. When they return, they will train the rest of the 160-member staff. As additional staff are trained each year thereafter, all employees will again review the program, he said.

Having grown up in a large family, Salas said the ability to deal well with others has come easy to him.

"When you have a big family, you learn how to handle things. You learn when to do things at the right time," said Salas, 38, dressed for work Tuesday in a colorful Hawaiian shirt.

"You also have to be patient," he said. "Very patient. Those skills are hard to find. But from there, you can do everything."

Although flattered by the award, Salas seemed eager Tuesday to finish talking about what makes him a good worker and get back to his job. And, immediately after a fellow worker asked him to help her when he had a minute, Salas was off, cutting his interview short with a quick good-bye.

"When you work with people like this, it's like working with a family," said Salas. "It feels good. And to do this job, you have to feel good about it. Otherwise it's not worth being here."