

Lesson 3 Let's Live in Harmony

Under a Shared Roof

Humanitas is a yellow brick house located in the city of Deventer, the Netherlands. It is a care center that houses more than 160 elderly residents who require assistance. Along with its supportive environment, Humanitas offers something unusual: young neighbors. At Humanitas, elderly residents share their living space with university students.

This unique "intergenerational living" project began in 2012, after budget cuts reduced the amount of money care homes in the Netherlands received. This funding reduction led to the loss of many essential elderly care programs, including social, educational, and counseling services.

Humanitas needed to seek an affordable solution to fill the gap left by the removal of these services. Since the building had numerous empty rooms available, the director decided to offer local university students free accommodations in return for spending time with the elderly residents. Many students were struggling to afford the area's high rents, so the proposal was a true win-win situation. Now, let's hear more about this intriguing place from two of the residents.

More Than a Free Place to Stay

Hi! My name is Jacob Jansen, and I've been living at Humanitas for over two years. I've really enjoyed my time here. As a live-in student, I'm required to spend at least 30 hours per month with my elderly neighbors in exchange for free accommodations. In reality, however, we spend a lot more time together than that. Sometimes I teach them things, such as how to use social media, and other times I just hang out with them. We have meals together, play games, and go shopping.

Humanitas doesn't feel like a care home to me. Instead, I consider it a community that I am a part of. Every time I come home, I tell my neighbors about my day. When I have a problem, they always have useful advice to share. With so much experience gathered over a lifetime, they possess knowledge that I have yet to acquire. They also teach me lots of little but important things, often without realizing it. For example, I've learned the value of having a casual chat over a cup of coffee from them. It's a really great way to take a break from rushing around all the time.

I used to feel sorry for the elderly because I focused only on the things they can't do. When I look at them now, however, I see all the things they can do. Obviously, Humanitas provides me with much more than a free place to stay. I've made deep, meaningful friendships that I'll never forget here.

I intend to stay at Humanitas for at least one more year. Living here has changed my life in ways I never thought possible, and I'm really grateful for this transformative experience. I have learned so much from my neighbors already, but I'm sure there is still a lot more that they can teach me.

A Breath of Fresh Air

My name is Helena Smit, and I am 93 years old. I have been living at Humanitas for the past 15 years, so I remember when we were first informed that we would have young people as neighbors. Believe me, not everyone was happy about it! But that quickly changed once they moved in. The students here are energetic, friendly, and caring. They make us laugh and create a joyful mood.

Humanitas was already a decent place to live before the students arrived, but it has become a lot more fun since they moved in. Recently, the students held a pajama party and invited us to join them. They taught us how to play some new games, and we all had a great time. It was like we were in our 20s again.

I sometimes hear loud music from my young next-door neighbor's apartment, but that is okay. It's a small matter compared to what they've brought to our lives. I'm grateful every day that they have become part of our community.

Speaking of my young neighbor, she has been here for more than two years now. Last year, she went through a difficult time of grief after she lost her father, so I did what came naturally. I stayed with her, held her hands when she cried, and listened to what she said. She later told me that I was a great comfort during that difficult time, which made me feel very good. It always feels nice to be reminded that I'm still capable of doing things for others.

I am nearly 100 years old, and I have bad knees. I understand that my knees aren't going to get any better. There is nothing much the doctors can do about the pain. But having young, vibrant people around helps me forget about the pain and enjoy my life!

There are currently six students living at Humanitas, with a long waiting list of others hoping to be offered a spot. Humanitas is a great example of how people of different ages can help each other and share their lives with one another. The older residents gain a more youthful perspective on life, while the younger residents receive valuable life lessons. More and more care homes around Europe are now trying intergenerational living, bringing the young and old together in harmony.