

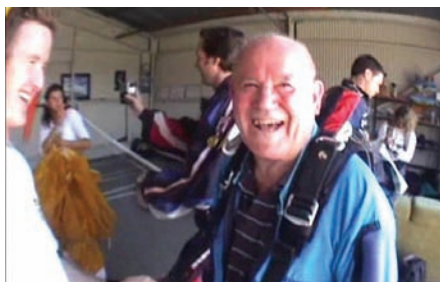
Excitement, adventure and an element of risk can, and should, be an important part of life for residents in aged care facilities, explains **Colin McDonnell**

Allan Rigby, 94, is a man who has lived a full life; he served in World War II, both within Australia and around the islands in the Pacific, and also worked in the building industry as a crane driver and Jack-of-all-trades. Allan and his wife came to live at UnitingCare Starrett Lodge in 2004. Allan had been caring for his wife, who was living with dementia, at home until they moved to Starrett Lodge, where he continued to care for her until she passed away.

Allan always likes to challenge himself and look for things he can do that he has never been able to achieve, for whatever reason, in his younger life. When his 86th birthday was approaching, we discussed how best he could celebrate the event. Many ideas were tossed into the ring but the most exciting suggestion Allan thought of was a tandem parachute jump. This was exciting, but also a worry for our staff due to possible risks. After several discussions with Allan, and urged on by his excitement and will to achieve this feat, we booked the day.

Feeling of freedom

Allan was up early, and after looking to the skies to make sure it was a clear day with little wind, the word was “GO!”.



UnitingCare Starrett Lodge resident Allan Rigby before and during his tandem parachute jump in 2006, at the age of 86. Video stills courtesy of Just Jump Skydive

Jumping for joy



UnitingCare Starrett Lodge resident Nora Griffiths (right), with staff member Vickie Sanchez, organiser of the Bucket List program, after Nora's helicopter flight to the Hunter Valley earlier this year. Photo courtesy of UnitingCare Starrett Lodge

Many staff arrived at the jump site to support Allan, who really was the calmest of us all. He had no concerns for his safety, stating that he had lived his life and continued to need an interest to keep him going. He enjoyed the flight looking out the window until they reached 16,000 feet (the altitude to jump), with not a care in the world.

Allan said when he jumped from the plane he felt numb for the first 20 feet and then he spread out his arms and “soared like a bird”. He felt free, excited and age was not a barrier – he could have been any age, the experience was that exhilarating and renewing that he gave it a score of “9.5 out of 10”. The skydiving team filmed Allan's jump and this footage has been a source of continued excitement from people who have seen it, including Allan himself, who still relives it.

Goal of a lifetime

The result, the excitement and the opportunity to assist Allan to achieve a goal of a lifetime at the age of 86 far outweighed the worry or risk. This experience instilled in our staff that resident choice and decision-making is such an important issue for people living in aged care facilities, and should be encouraged and adopted.

The Bucket List

Allan's tandem jump and Nora Griffiths' helicopter ride (see photo above) are just two of the many experiences enjoyed by residents as part of UnitingCare Starrett Lodge's Bucket List program. Other adventures have included deep sea fishing trips, jet boat rides and a spin in a stretch limousine.

The program was introduced 12 months ago and enables residents to plan and take part in activities they have always wanted to do. They decide what they would like to do and our staff help them organise it. Residents raise money to pay for the activities by making and selling baked goods at Starrett Lodge. The philosophy of the Bucket List program is about residents being participants in life, rather than just recipients of care. ■

Colin McDonnell is the Care Service Manager at UnitingCare Ageing's Starrett Lodge, in Hamlyn Terrace, north of Sydney, NSW. Starrett Lodge is a low-care hostel comprising four houses, one of which is dedicated to support people with dementia. Contact Colin at: cmcdonnell@unitingcare.nswact.org.au