

## Creating opportunities to build relationships

Most of the guests at the Circle of Friends luncheon had never met, yet it didn't take long for them to be chatting about their childhoods, holiday celebrations and why they love living at Mulberry Gardens of Southington.

The conversation never ceased as Paula Morelli, recreation assistant, and volunteer Kathy Kuehl served salad, baked cod, stuffed pasta shells and beverages. "I'm a fussy eater but this is absolutely delicious. All the food here is good," said one-year resident Jackie Hafner as she tasted the lightly breaded fish. Others nodded in agreement.

Circle of Friends has been popular since it was formed eight years ago by Activities Director Lori Pisani as a way for residents and staff to connect as well as feel special.

Paula keeps careful records to ensure that every resident is invited in rotation and more recently, a staff member, too. "The luncheons are a great way for people to get to know their neighbors. And it has been invaluable in helping us to know our residents more personally," Paula said. "Meeting like this gives us feedback."

Linens and china set the scene for the special weekly lunches that are held in a private dining room. On this particular day, approximately 10 residents from different floors gathered around the table for fine dining and conversation.

Guest Claire Duksa, who moved to Mulberry Gardens three years ago, shared memories of living as a young bride on a farm on West Street in Southington. Other residents chimed in about their own lives before they made Mulberry Gardens their home.

As they dined, the discussion shifted to the upcoming outings that were planned including holiday shopping and lunch out. Many of the guests said they were looking forward to hearing the middle school carolers that would be presenting a holiday concert in the lobby the following week. Over chitchat, new friendships were forged.

As the guests finished their chocolate mousse, they chatted about their new community. "It's wonderful, no cooking, no housework. I cooked for 68 years. I feel like a queen," said one of the women.

"Paula has really taken Circle of Friends to a new level. These gatherings have been a tremendous success in building relationships and ensuring that everyone feels that they are integral to our Mulberry Gardens community," Lori said.