

From left: students Patrick Stoffer, 27, and Onno Selbach, 27, and OAP residents Piebe Dam, 77, and Jans Reinink, 80

Is this the world's coolest old people's home?

Life in a care home can be dull and miserable – but what if the other residents are young, single and like to party? Janice Turner discovers a place where twentysomethings and octogenarians hang out under the same roof

PORTRAITS Tom Jackson





From left: Anneloes Olthof, 24, Sientje Attema, 83, and Annemarie Jonkman, 78



From left: Jurrien Mentink, 22, Henk Norder, 82, Sores Duman, 23, Harry Ter-Braak, 89, and Patrick Stoffer, 27

Two mobility scooters are haring around a corridor. On the first is a woman of at least 85; the other is ridden by a young guy in jeans and designer specs. As he corners fiercely to overtake, the scooter almost tipping over, the woman lets out a delighted squeal. Jurrien Mentink shows me the race video on his iPhone. But what if she fell

and broke a hip, I say, what if her relatives sued for negligence? Jurrien shrugs. "It was fun. Why shouldn't old people have fun?"

The Humanitas home for the elderly in Deventer, east of Amsterdam, is like no other I've known. And I've seen plenty, seeking a place for my bed-bound father, visiting my godmothers in their final years. Beige walls, suffocating rooms, institutional furniture, swipe cards and keypads to stop breakouts, a circle of heads lolling in the TV room, the smell. The old were fed, washed and safe. But with nothing to do or talk about or look forward to, this seemed to be a dead end to make you welcome death itself.

When Gea Sijpkens became Humanitas

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director in 2012, she wanted to create "the warmest house there has ever been". By "warm", she means the lovely but untranslatable Dutch word *gezellig*. According to context, it can denote a cosy room, a convivial party, a friendly person, or the sense of belonging felt when you laugh with old friends. "When someone is 96, there is nothing medically you can do to make them better," says Sijpkens. "You can only improve their environment." To bring *gezellig* to an old folks' home meant injecting life.

But, with no bigger budget than any other state-funded Dutch care home, Sijpkens had to be inventive. At first, she offered local schools use of the home's facilities, to get children to mix with the elderly. But the plan was stalled

by educational bureaucracy. So she put another idea to her board: invite young people to live at the home. "They were appalled," she says. "They said, 'You can't have students, with their sex, drugs and rock'n'roll, among our vulnerable residents!'" But eventually they agreed to a pilot scheme.

Sijpkens's advert had only one applicant. It is hard to imagine Onno Selbach, with his spiky hair, restless energy and reputation as a major party boy, living among 90-year-olds. Before he came to Humanitas, he admits, "I would get impatient if I was stuck behind an old person boarding a bus." But he was sick of young flatmates who never cleaned up, and besides, his house was about to be demolished.

So he met up with Sijpkens, who explained her vision. Most boldly of all, there would be no rules: Sijpkens wanted the young to be full of vigour and fun, not hushed goody-goodies tiptoeing around the old. Students would live at the home free of charge, in exchange for spending 30 hours a month with residents. They wouldn't perform care duties, as the tough, dirty work would be done by professionals. Apart from organising one evening meal a week, they

would mainly just hang out. (Sijpkens calculated that with student rent costing about €300, or £260, a month, this was the equivalent of being paid €10 an hour.) But no one would clock the students' hours: they would be trusted.

When Onno, a social work student, moved in, everyone found it strange. A case of beer appeared next to the wheelchairs. Staff, forgetting which room was his, would barge in to find him hungover and naked. They informed Sijpkens that he'd staggered in at 4am, reeking of booze. One night Onno came back with three girls and, blundering around the corridors looking for a toilet, set off the alarm.

But Sijpkens stuck to her concept: "I did nothing: I wanted to change the atmosphere of this place, which means the young people must be allowed to party, and stir things up." Like Jurrien racing the old lady on a mobility scooter? "Yes! High in my mind is that these residents are adults. They have been alive more than 80 years. If they want to take a risk and race around a corridor, then that is their decision. Who am I to protect them from joy?"

There are now six young people – three men and three women – living at Humanitas

'I wanted to change the atmosphere here. The young people must be allowed to stir things up'

among 160 elderly residents, and they clearly generate much joy. I chat with Patrick Stoffer in a beautiful garden, created by residents. (Although the old folk prefer to sit out front by the car park watching who comes and goes.) The rooms have balconies, stripy awnings and window boxes of red geraniums. From outside they look like a block of holiday flats.

It is a testament to Humanitas that twentysomethings, even rent-free, would want to live in an old folks' home. But this is a vibrant place used by many in the local community, including a billiards club and a group of autistic children, who have built a huge train set in the basement. There is a full gym including an exercise bike with a virtual-

reality screen, so housebound residents can imagine they are cycling through Maastricht or Paris. The public rooms are furnished with funky chairs and chandeliers: there are excellent coffee machines with piles of biscuits. One common room is decked out like an old Dutch "brown bar", another has a beach theme and there's a popular roof terrace. The floors are wooden, the bathrooms spotless; there is no smell. The young people romp about the complex, treating it like home.

Patrick, 27, shows me his room: it has a balcony, bathroom, electric hob, enough space to entertain. Propped against the wall is a wine rack he's promised to assemble for an elderly neighbour. No one minds his loud music; most of the residents are quite deaf. But students do complain about their neighbours listening to TV quiz shows at full volume.

Patrick is still studying because he dropped out of education at 19 to help care for his father after a devastating stroke. He is a sweet, considerate soul. When he sees a woman in a wheelchair called Carla struggling to reach her glasses, he goes over to help her and removes her jacket in the heat. This is at ▶

Sores Duman, 23, and
Suzanne Briot, 89



the heart of what the students do: chatting, administering tiny kindnesses, reassuring, taking time to listen. There is one prim, upright woman I see, always sitting alone looking disconsolate. I ask if she likes it here. "No," she says bluntly. "I used to have a large house. Now I just have one sleeping room." It is a reminder that nobody wants to be in a care home, however luxurious, until they have no choice. Patrick talks to the woman until she smiles. They say goodbye with a high five.

I ask Patrick what he's learnt here. "That the old are people too, that getting old is hard and we should enjoy every moment we are fit and well. But also that my generation is rushing around believing that happiness comes from buying expensive stuff or travel. The old get pleasure from such little things."

All the students speak of the gratitude and smiles they can earn from a few kind words. In the dining room, where residents and students are playing *Sjoelen*, a traditional Dutch game, I meet Onno Selbach, 27, the hard-partying original young resident. After four years, he is now a trained social worker, and will shortly leave to buy his own home. "This is more like a high school than you'd expect," he says. He quickly noted the

They have taught the residents the college drinking game beer pong, and how to use a tablet computer

different elderly cliques: the nerds, the "tough guys" who play cards, the flirty old ladies who like to tease him and even smack his bottom as he walks by.

"There are differences, particularly in our schedules," he says. "Sometimes I'm coming in from a night out and the residents say, 'Onno, you're up early!' They find it unbelievable that I'm just coming home." He taught residents the college drinking game beer pong, where you throw a ball into a glass and then down the contents. Anneloes Olthof, 24, has taught Annie Middelburg how to use a tablet computer. Now she posts on Facebook and snapchats with her family. "When one of us puts up a photo," says Anneloes, "she always 'likes' it or makes a funny comment."

Annie, 85, was a housewife and her late husband taught at an agricultural college. I ask her what she thinks of her young neighbours. "They're great. I think they have more fun than we did in our day." All the

residents I meet are from modest backgrounds: a barber, a housemaid, a shop-worker. Dutch workers pay into a national insurance scheme which covers social care, which they top up according to wealth. In England and Wales, if you have assets over £23,250 (£25,250 in Scotland) you fund all your care.

Jurrien Mentink moved in three years ago when he was just 19. An urban design student, he wanted to leave his family home, but as in Britain, Holland has a student accommodation shortage. He is the most cerebral of the students, has thought deeply about his time in Humanitas and given a TEDx talk about his theories. The students, he reflects, are rather like pets. Most mornings he has breakfast in his room, but before he leaves for college he drops in on his elderly neighbours, who like to wave him off. "I know it gives them something to think about: 'What will Jurrien do today?'"

The students are emissaries from the outside world, providing dispatches to those ➔

who are, by dint of infirmity, no longer part of it. "There can be a circle of decline," he says. "People become passive, until they lose their humanity. But you can break that circle." Often simple things give people agency again, as when recently, his ninetysomething neighbour showed him a flyer about a new Chinese restaurant, and Jurrien took him to try it out.

Jurrien is responsible for bingo prizes, and suggested that Sijpkens award €50 that must be spent on an excursion. The first winner chose to go the zoo with her daughter. "Now all the residents discuss what they would do, where they'd go, if they won," he says. To an average person this would be nothing, but to a confined elderly person, it is a tiny stake in the future.

Above all, the young have changed the home's conversation. The old often have no narrative except the up and down of ailments; nothing new except different pills, no meetings except doctors' appointments. The students are driven by new girlfriends, jobs, college courses, friends and parties. "The old love to gossip," says Jurrien. "You learn that very quickly."

Anneloes says they always ask about her boyfriend, and never fail to notice his visits. The students are free to bring lovers to their rooms, though they tend to let them leave via a fire escape to avoid curious elderly eyes. Sijpkens says observing the students' love lives reconnects the old with their own romantic selves. "They remember when they fell in love."

And, says Jurrien, living here you realise that the old are not disgusting, asexual beings, but once both desirable and bursting with desire. "There is a woman on my corridor," he says, "who has a photo of herself in her twenties. And, man, she was hot!" Some of the women like to flirt with him. "It is entirely harmless. We both know nothing will ever come of it. But it is a sign that they are alive." Does living in an old folks' home cramp the students' own sex lives? The boys claim it is a great pick-up line: girls come back because they are curious, and it is attractive to see guys being so delightful to old ladies.

Two years ago, Humanitas's idea won a €10,000 prize for social innovation, and since then the organisation has been contacted by care homes from across the world. So far no British homes have got in touch, although Professor Martin Green, chief executive of Care England, applauds the scheme. "What works best is when people are brought together for a real reason, not a contrived one. The students need somewhere to live and the old need company; everyone gains."

Gea Sijpkens believes that this innovation is in fact a return to a more traditional way of living. "We had a group from Singapore here recently," she says. "They said young people in all cultures had become princes and princesses who lived with no responsibility to the old. This restores that connection." Observing the



Harry Ter-Braak, 89, and Anneloes Olthof, 24

'I had to protect myself, not get too close. But when you live with old people, you get used to the dying'

students and the elderly, I see the same affectionate, mutually amused relationship I note between my sons and their grandparents.

But here, discussions can be more frank than with family members. Elderly women remarked that they disapproved of the young's sexual freedom outside marriage, but – after a debate with students – concluded that they would have enjoyed it too. Stories of the Dutch wartime occupation are a common theme: the residents tell of parents sent off to German labour camps, resistance fighters, secret radios, surviving bombing raids.

Onno's first friend at the home was a 93-year-old man who told great war stories. "Like nothing you've ever read in a book," he says. "Then he got cancer, became worse and worse and then he was gone." He looks sad. "After that, I had to protect myself, not get too close. But when you live with old people, you get used to the dying." Jurrien says that 50 people have died since he joined the home; four were friends, one very close. He shows

me a photograph of himself and Jo Van Beek, 93, laughing together. "She was the first friend I made here, with a great sense of humour. She taught me so much." He'd watch her looking at the wind in the trees. "She could sit there for hours. To her it was perfection."

He found Jo's stillness deeply calming. Indeed the slowness of the old, often regarded as infuriating, he sees as a lesson in living. Then his friend grew ill, lost her sight and her desire to live. "I visited her in hospital. She wasn't in pain. She'd had a great life."

After that, like Onno Selbach, he doesn't get deeply attached to the residents, but he has also learnt that death, although inevitable, need not be feared. "I had a neighbour who was 105, and one morning I dropped in to say I was off to school, and she gave me her hand. She wanted to say goodbye. She said, 'Have a good life. Use it well.' And by the time I returned that night she'd died. You learn that life is round. And you can help someone live well right to the very end." ■