How did you come to connect with each other originally?

Alex: One of our other VITAS affiliates was doing a similar thing with their local school district and when I heard about it, I knew I wanted to try it. Then somebody named Felicia called and before she could finish explaining about TRACE, I said yes. One of my closest, oldest friends is a quadriplegic and I think my openness to this work stemmed from there. I’ve always tried to help him become independent and I realized there were so many other young people who could use that support, encouragement and opportunity.

Kathy, do all the students in TRACE volunteer at VITAS? Who decides who gets to volunteer at VITAS?

Kathy: When we look for sites for our students, we’re thinking about what will help them in the workforce. Students can do data entry and other activities, which really help develop the skills they will need. There are students who come to VITAS regularly, and other students who come periodically. Students pick sites depending on what they want to do. We have students that like working in a stock room, so we have volunteer sites that prepare them for that. Not only do the volunteer positions give them work skills, they give them social skills, and the desire to prove their independence.

(to TRACE students) When you first learned that you were going to volunteers for VITAS, what did you think?

Teresa: When I first came I was kind of scared, but then I got to know Alex. He is a cool person. I love to organize papers and be on the computer.

Alex, VITAS offers hospice care. It’s there for people and their families at the end of life. This might be a little scary for young people—it’s scary for me sometimes and I’m bit older, how do you talk to your students about what VITAS does?

Alex: I try to keep it as simple as possible. We work with even younger kids, elementary age, so we have to keep it simple. I say we are taking care of people who are sick and who aren’t going to get better. A lot of the activities are administrative -- mailers, recycling admission packets. Those activities aren’t direct exposure.

Today the students are making Valentine’s Day Cards for patients and their families, so there is an inkling of direct exposure. The students all know to make sure their comments are very appropriate. For instance, it should be “I hope your Valentines Day is
filled with love,” not, “I hope all your Valentine’s Days are filled with love.” Effective comments focus on that day, nothing that is long term. In the beginning, we trained students on what types of comments to include; now they do it automatically.

Kathy, how do you prepare students to volunteer successfully? Is there training before they start on a volunteer job site?

Kathy: Yes. Wednesdays are self-advocacy days. On those days, we work on skills, job manners and work attitudes. We focus on developing independence; so if we’re not with them, they can do whatever we’re teaching on their own. We do lots of repetition. And each student is unique, what one needs another one doesn’t. Whenever we meet a new student, we spend time talking to them and trying to understand their unique qualities.

It’s not just the two hours at VITAS that prepare them for work, we spend the entire day working on other skills. On the bus ride over we prepare for what we’ll be doing. We make sure they have all their belongings and are appropriately dressed for the day. We have students who use wheelchairs so the other students are encouraged to be aware and assist by opening doors. They know which book to sign into upon arrival, and they know how to greet the receptionist. We go over the skills necessary for a successful workday and reflect upon what improvements can be made, fostering a learning environment. Our teaching is all day.

To (TRACE Students). Imagine it’s five years from today, and someone asks what you remember about your work with VITAS. What would you say?

Teresa: I like to help around. I like to do mailings. I like to make cards. I just like it because people are nice and they always have us do different types of work.

Kelly: I like to do computer work. I like to help Alex with patients’ addresses.

Alex: We send out mailers – bereavement information to family members. Often times the packets gets returned. So Kelly uses a couple different computer systems to find out which patients those returned addresses are connected to. Then she updates the mailing lists so that we no longer send anything to the out of date addresses.

(Alex and Kathy discuss tasks for the day)

Kathy, what role do you play once a student is volunteering? How often are you on site with them?

Kathy: Alex will go over the tasks for the day, and then Kelly and Teresa (TRACE students) can handle it from there, since they are very experienced. We help Teresa and Kelly prepare the area and set up work stations. Then if I have students who aren’t as skilled, or who are still learning, I pair them with Teresa and Kelley. I oversee to make sure everything is going okay. To get ready, we do a test about the work. Then, we review by asking everybody— is this correct? The students coach each other. The experienced students help those who are coming up to
Alex, how did you decide what kinds of volunteer work the students would do? I know you work hard to keep it fresh time they come in.

Alex: I started out by looking at where we needed the most help administratively. We were really struggling with bereavement mailers. For those mailers, we have to stuff from 1100 to 1300 envelopes with 3 pages each. It was a good task for them to do. Then I started going internally, to other staff, asking them if they had other ideas. That’s when the recycling came up. We in are health care so there is a lot of paper work. Our admission packet is 45 pages long and in the past we tossed the packets when we were through with them. We thought that was wasteful so we started saving them. When the students come in I give them a stack. They sort and recycle the paper, and we reuse anything that wasn’t used the first time around.

The computer work came up because one day I looked at the students and recognized that many were much higher functioning than I originally anticipated. We needed to prepare them for what they wanted and would face out in the world. So I trained them to do the mailing updates. Our volunteers visit patients, and they have to report on their visits. So the students enter that information in a database. At first I sat down with them to help them learn the database, a lot of it is repetition, but they can pick it up. When they come in, I watch them do one to see if they remember from last time, then I leave them alone. We never have any errors with them. They also work in Excel and with our VITAS specific databases.

When I think of sustainability from a student’s perspective, it’s about helping a student learn job skills and nurturing their belief in their own competence so it becomes part of fabric of their lives—exudes from them when they meet other people and apply for jobs. Do you see students developing this kind of sustainability?

Kathy: We had a student named Randy and because of the job skills and confidence he received from working at VITAS, he now works independently at Goodwill. He has a pay check; he feels good. His confidence is amazing and his sense of accomplishment is self-evident.

Alex: When we first started, and it’s been a little over three years, two of the girls that came in first group, Lauren and Alicia, transitioned to the adult program at TMI. They continued to come to us, after the transition and they’re here every Tuesday. Lauren was originally very shy, but very friendly. When she got nervous she tended to stutter and it took her a while to get her thoughts out. One of our medical directors knew her mother and he would come by and chat with her. She opened up, as a result. Now, you don’t see the stuttering and the nervousness anymore. Alicia’s confidence
with the computer system is amazing, she knows my log in, and she’ll come and go straight to the work. You can see how comfortable she is.

Kathy, from your perspective what does Alex and the staff of VITAS do that make this a good volunteer work site?

Kathy: At VITAS they are very welcoming; you can feel it with everyone who works here. Everyone greets us. Even Mandy who owns the deli, she greets us with open arms even if we overtake the deli and it takes us a while to order. Others sites don’t create a set day and time for us to come. Alex does the research ahead of time, so I know they’ll be work available when we get here. We have a lot of work sites, places we need to be, and the regular routine helps us. We need a commitment. It’s a commitment on both ends. If he has an emergency project for us, we try to make ourselves available.

Alex, what do the TRACE staff do that make this partnership work for VITAS?

Alex: Their communication is phenomenal, it was from the get go. Hearing how the other organizations don’t have set days and times, blows me away, because the routine makes my life so much easier. We do have flexibility. If they’re not able to make it, they call me and let me know. They tell me about their holiday schedule ahead of time, and they’re okay if I have to call and cancel. When we have a big mailer it can take multiple days to finish. They try to be there when we need them. Their eagerness to help is really important.

Alex, I imagine that one of the difficulties of sustaining a volunteer program is finding dedicated, responsible volunteers that might be around for the long term. You don’t want constant volunteer turnover. I might be putting words in your mouth but do you think your partnership with TRACE has helped your programs sustainability in that you know that each year that you’ll have a certain number of students coming each week for a certain number of hours?

Alex: It’s hugely helpful. I don’t have to scramble to piecemeal volunteers. If I can set up volunteer tasks early in the week, it helps me plan other meetings. I have volunteers that can’t commit to a set day and time, it does it make it more difficult. I know that Fridays the TRACE students are here. I easily get them set up and I can be at appointment a half an hour later. And, the fact that they clean up after themselves is great.

Other staff members love them too. TRACE is here on Friday, TMI, (another program for young adults with disabilities) is here on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, and ARC of San Diego (a program for adults with disabilities) comes on Wednesdays. The receptionist will even plan tasks ahead of time that the students can help with.
**Did all of these partnerships emerge from your work with TRACE?**

*Alex:* Yes, all of these groups started because of the TRACE partnership. When the TRACE students transitioned to TMI, it was a no-brainer. Then I thought adults should have the same opportunity so I contacted the ARC.

**Alex, you've been spearheading this partnership from the VITAS end for 3 years now. What have you learned from this partnership?**

*Alex:* I had been exposed to someone with a physical disability before but not to people with developmental disabilities. So when the group first started, in my head, I labeled and I thought about the limits of what they'd be able to do. It was my ignorance. I didn't know they could take on major complex tasks. I've learned that everyone is an individual and if you spend the time training people they can learn it.

**Another sustainability issue is how to keep something going beyond individual personalities. Have you thought about or made steps to keep the partnership going even in the event that one of you leaves your current job and a new person comes in?**

*Alex:* When we came to the end of the first year, the question came up--what happened when the TRACE students moved to TMI? It seemed that they weren't going to replace the TRACE students, and it seemed beyond our control. So I contacted them, and said no we want to keep TRACE here on Friday. We've gone through a couple different TRACE job coaches but there is so much support here, from our senior management to our patient care secretary, that if I left they wouldn't allow this partnerships to end. The volunteers have proven their own value.

**Did the San Diego Service Inclusion Network (a local coalition of volunteer programs and disability organizations) play any role in the success of the partnership?**

*Alex:* The Service Inclusion Network meetings helped me in a big way. It showed me that I was heading in the right direction with my way of thinking. I wanted to provide an experience that was beneficial for the students and have it be in a welcoming environment. The meetings taught me that I needed to do education with the office staff, which I did, to remove any fears they may have had and let them know how the volunteers could help them. This was what I gained from hearing stories from other network members.

**What else would you like to tell readers?**

*Alex:* I believe so strongly in this partnership. I do whatever I can to make it successful to give them the opportunities they need. I love our partnership.

To learn more about the TRACE-VITAS Partnership contact Alexander Silva, VITAS Volunteer Coordinator, at (858) 503-4724 or Alexander.Silva@vitas.com.