A CONNECTED COMMUNITY hand a sense of family these are some of the hallmarks that make Independence Hill Retirement Community as incredible as it is. While many retirement communities serve food and organize activities, Independence Hill sets the standard with their exceptional spirit, close knit community and superior service to the residents. For nearly three decades, Independence Hill has been guided by a mission focused on providing the very best to their residents. They’ve succeeded in achieving this goal, creating a setting reminiscent of neighborhood days of old. For roughly 14 years, Executive Director Michelle Houriet has led the charge to kindle and grow family bonds between the Independence Hill team and residents with great success.

Throughout her tenure, Michelle has strived to create a passionately purposeful experience for those who call Independence Hill “Home” and she greatly values the trust they afford to her and her team. Stability is key to fostering a community and instilling a truly “at home” feeling. With Independence Hill’s impressive employee retention, residents are able to become easily acquainted with staff members, and eventually both treat one another like family. Indeed, six staff members in the dining room alone have been with the community for over 15 to 20 years. This allows residents’ families to find comfort in having a staff of 160 working together to create a home for their loved one. “We strive to create an atmosphere that ensures our residents have a great day every day!” says Michelle.
The sense of community experienced at Independence Hill is not achieved with good intentions alone. It takes a team that understands the value of community. A team that is committed to maintaining and improving Independence Hill’s unmatched familial feeling. Michelle explains that when looking for new staff members, they will wait for the right person to come along rather than fill the spot with the wrong person. With building our team, we actually do get to “choose our family” and we take it very seriously. She tells new hires from the beginning, “This industry isn't for everybody. It requires true care, commitment, hard work and the willingness to put our residents first, always... If it isn't for you, that's okay. However, I encourage you to go and find your passion! Independence Hill is only for those employees who whole-heartedly want to be here.” Roughly a third of Independence Hill’s employees have been with them for over a decade, proving Michelle’s earnest belief that this is truly a labor of love with a sense of family at the core.

Creating a connection with Independence Hill residents drives Michelle to foster an authentic environment of quality relationships. She stresses to her team the fundamental importance of seeing and understanding the beauty in each relationship. This dedication to creating a community by building strong bonds “allows us to get to know each of our residents for who they are,” Michelle says. It is incredible to see the Independence Hill team truly know every resident and greet them by name. Michelle emphasizes the importance of this, “We are in their home, of course we know their name!” In addition to this, she and her team members make it a point to know the residents’ interests, their families, and most importantly, who they truly are and how they see themselves. As Michelle says, “Everyone has a story, and we care enough to want to know it.” That’s the beauty of connecting with every person they encounter. Michelle understands that moving can be daunting, though what shows Michelle that the Independence Hill team “gets it” is when amidst the hustle and bustle of moving, new residents who are in the middle of big change, take the time to compliment the team. “They’re so thankful for the smallest things we do,” shares Michelle with a smile. Our residents have “done, they’ve seen, they’ve traveled the world, and now they move in with us and are in awe of our team for doing what we love? WOW! We are so honored!” Michelle beams.

Independence Hill has set out to improve the quality of life for all residents by finding how to connect them to their passion and purpose. Fulfilling the need for purpose and connection allows residents to feel good about themselves and opens them up to other people and opportunities. “There are new beginnings all the time, including hobbies, adventures, new friendships, and even romance,” Michelle says. “It is such a pleasure to observe and be a part of!” The Independence Hill team focuses on providing a jovial atmosphere, in pursuit of their mission: “Caring to Create a Lifestyle that Nurtures the Spirit.” To enhance this sense of community, Independence Hill residents have an array of community and resident inspired activities and events such as their “Hill Topper’s Chorus,” Big Band Dances, Senior Olympic Games or the “Dinner of the Decade,” which celebrates residents who’ve been with Independence Hill for 10 or more years.

One of Michelle’s favorite programs has been a “Grandpal” reading program. Recognizing the opportunity and need for inter-generation relationships, the program arranges for local 2nd-graders to pair up with an Independence

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Hill resident as their “Grandpal.” Michelle gushes about arriving at the school with the residents and seeing “20 kids out there waiting, practically wagging their little tails like sweet puppies because they’re so excited to see their Grandpal.” The resident reads to the child at the beginning of year, and by the year’s end, the child is reading to their Grandpal, leaving both bursting with pride. As this program has grown, Michelle has seen a notable impact. “These relationships are special, they’re powerful and they’re needed,” Michelle explains. Michelle shares one story of a Grandpal resident who had passed away: “We had lost a resident and his little Grandpal showed up with red, white and blue flowers for his veteran friend. It was powerful.” Michelle said that it both filled and broke her heart. After the services, she went and thanked the mother for bringing her son, during a school day, to celebrate his Grandpal. Michelle was even able to share a picture on her phone with the student’s mom that she had taken of the “Grandpals” reading together.

Seeing the impact the Grandpal program has had, Michelle looked for ways to take it further. Two years ago, the Summer Adventures at the Hill kids camp debuted Grandpal summer camp starting at 7 a.m. until 6 p.m. and limited to only 20. The kids come to spend their whole day with the residents. With no electronics allowed and only one movie shown per week, the kids are spending around 45 hours per week interacting with their Grandpals, the residents. The residents inspire the kids to learn so much that has been lost over the generations, such as a firm handshake, eye contact, and speaking loud and clearly. They start their day at the Independence Hill Assisted Living dining room over breakfast, shaking hands with all the residents, and then go on to play games, sing songs and go on field trips together. The Grandpal Summer Camp also features a weekly formal luncheon where they learn great table manners and they also pair the kids up with residents who held similar occupations to the children’s aspirations. Kids, their parents and residents all look forward to this “one of a kind” Summer Camp. By the end of the day, the children are exhausted, as they are “present” all day with their senior buddies. Michelle believes that having the kids engaged with the full head-on attention from the residents, skyrocketed the kids’ self-esteem. “That’s one way the relationships were just so amazing...each child felt so important,” Michelle says with a smile.

It is no wonder Independence Hill has such a great reputation after so many years in the Stone Oak Community. Michelle and the Independence Hill team make it a point to honor their commitments, fulfill all promises made and will always strive to care for, connect with and do more for their residents. It’s not about maintaining the status quo, but rather pushing themselves to excellence for the residents. As Michelle explains, “This is home. It’s not about having a surface relationship. It’s about getting to know each person today, honoring them where they are, for who they are and what they have done.” With family at the forefront of the Independence Hill teams mind, they’ll undoubtedly continue to care with all their heart and will continue satisfying their residents for many years to come.

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For more information call 210.591.0013 or visit www.independencehill.com. Independence Hill Retirement Community is located at 20450 Huebner Road in San Antonio, TX 78258.