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Chris Collar, the founder and president of Helen's House, serves paczki, a polish pastry, to Lucy Hebert, a resident at the assisted-living home at 5211 W. Century Farm Blvd., Appleton. The Business News photo by Amanda Lauer



Helen's House, a four-bedroom assisted-living home, looks like many other Appleton-area homes. The home is staffed 24 hours a day by certified nursing assistants and a registered nurse is at the facility on almost a daily basis.

## House that offers care is place to call home

### Four-bedroom facility offers alternative to nursing homes

By Amanda Lauer  
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Tucked into a newer residential neighborhood on the north side of Appleton is a four-bedroom house that looks like any other home in the area. Walking past, a person would never guess it was an assisted-care facility. Stepping into Helen's House, guests are encouraged to take their shoes off and make themselves at home because in every sense of the word, that's what this facility is — a home.

Chris Collar is the founder and president of Helen's House. Collar has a degree in business administration from St. Norbert College and worked for Kimberly-Clark Corp. for 23 years before deciding he wanted to do something different with his life.

His mother, Helen Griesbach Collar, was the inspiration for his new career. "She was a lifelong resident of Appleton and had been a widow for 24 years," he said. "At age 90, she had a heart attack and because she was living alone it went unreported for four or five days."

Initially, his mother was able to stay at home with professional care but after taking a couple of falls was moved to a large skilled-nursing facility. She passed away a couple months later.

"They do a lot of things to make these places look and feel more homey but at the end of the day, it's a large facility with long hallways," Collar said. "What I saw in her, that I think is very typical with a lot of families, is you take somebody who is very independent, and they kind of lose their individuality and to some extent give up because they feel defeated."

"We're truly blessed by having a lot of good, high-quality facilities in the area," he

said, "but what really surprised me was how that environment can weigh on the residents and the family because it isn't a home."

That experience caused Collar to investigate other options for senior living. His nephew was working for Brookside Homes of America, headquartered in Erie, Penn., a company that provided residential alternatives to large nursing facilities.

"We have a lot of great options for seniors to move into here, but I think families would like the opportunity to move their loved ones to a smaller place that had a high care level if they knew it existed," Collar said.

In July of 2013, Collar opened the doors to Helen's House. The living environment involves four seniors sharing a private, single-family home in a residential neighborhood. Helen's House provides individualized personal care and nursing services to each resident to ensure they have around-the-clock support, enabling them to remain in the environment that is most comfortable to them — an actual home.

"When families come in and see Helen's House and the one-on-four care ratio and they see the customization the staff is able to provide, they immediately think it's going to cost them more than the places they've been looking at," Collar said. "The reality is that Helen's House is comparable or in many cases less expensive than other skilled nursing facilities that we have here in the Fox Cities." Helen's House accepts both private pay and medical assistance.

The reason this is so cost effective is because of the low overhead and infrastructure, Collar said. "We're able to be a very efficient means of providing a high level of care to the residents that are here. At the

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— Chris Collar, founder,  
Helen's House,  
Appleton

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end of the day, families want to entrust their loved ones to an organization that's going to care for them, and provide them dignity and respect.”

The home is staffed day and night by CNAs and there is a registered nurse, Kerry Shepard, who is at the facility on almost a daily basis. "She provides the oversight, the coordination, and she advocates on behalf of the residents to the primary care physicians," Collar said.

"We monitor medically the things that are necessary to monitor with our residents," Shepard said. "We strive to be top in personal care and interacting and providing meaning for their life. I'm on call 24/7. The CNAs are responsible for taking care of the entire home,

cooking and everything.”

The idea of Helen's House is to make it as much a home-like experience as possible for the residents. The private bedrooms are furnished with items the residents provide. There are scheduled activities but they are not mandatory. The folks who live there can go to bed and get up on their own schedule; they aren't required to follow a set agenda.

"The beautiful thing about Helen's House is that many of the activities that we do during the day are authentic rhythm of life activities that you can only do when you're in a home, like helping with meal preparation," Collar said. "Occasionally, we'll have a resident who wants to fold laundry. It's customizable to the resident and their likes and dislikes."

Helen's House has the ability to care for residents throughout their lives, even as health or mental abilities begin to diminish. "As residents' (needs) increase we're able to bring in skilled nursing so they can remain here up to and including hospice. That's comforting for families to know once they entrust us to the care of their loved one, in most circumstances we can care for them right until the end of life in an environment that is pleasing and supportive and loving."

A second Helen's House is opening in Kaukauna in May, with more in the planning stages. Collar said running this facility is what he was really meant to do with his life.

"There's nothing more rewarding than to see families come in who are literally in tears describing what they are going through and seeing that look of relief come over them when this is what they've been hoping they could find for their loved one but didn't know existed," he said. "You can't even put it into words how neat that is."