

More than Medicine

Dr. Seema Patel reflects on the heart of care at The Virginia Home

The sharp ring of my alarm starts my day, but it's the faces I meet when I drive into the parking lot that truly wake me up. Staff arriving for their shifts, residents heading out with therapists or volunteers, and wheelchair wheels rolling steadily across the walkways—all reminders that The Virginia Home is already buzzing with life before I even open my office door.

I am often greeted by residents before I've even set down my bag. Some tell me they aren't feeling well. Others want to share a dream—plans for a family trip to Disney, excitement about a camp day, or simple reflections on how their morning has begun. These conversations may seem small, but they are the foundation of my work. They remind me that my role is more than medicine. It is about listening, connecting, and helping shape lives.

Inbox Triage

The first hour of my morning belongs to my inbox. Overnight updates, messages from the Night Shift Supervisor, and new clinical protocols pile up quickly. I triage the routine notes, flag the complex ones, and begin rounds with the nursing supervisors and Director of Nursing. Together, we prioritize the most pressing concerns: a resident with recurrent infections, another with falls and agitation, or a new consult from a hospitalist who doesn't know our residents as deeply as we do. Coordinating these moving parts takes patience, persistence, and partnership.

Morning Rounds

Morning rounds take me from room to room, where medicine meets humanity. One resident with advanced dementia brightens when music plays, his clouded eyes suddenly clear as his arms wave in time to a tune from long ago. Another resident, newly admitted, misses his mother at night, so we try everything from a music box to a stuffed bear with her recorded voice. These small, personal solutions may not register on a chart, but they are victories all the same.

Behind the Numbers

After breakfast trays are cleared, the therapies begin. Residents scatter to physical, occupational, and recreational therapy—or off-site programs, family visits, and jobs. While they go about their day, mine often shifts into the world of administration: quality assurance meetings, reviewing infection control, evaluating weight changes, and discussing hospital readmissions. These sessions are not just about data points—they are about finding patterns and solutions. Why are urinary tract infections trending upward? Could hydration protocols help? Can we train new staff in de-escalation techniques to reduce reliance on medications?

Conversations That Matter

Afternoons bring harder conversations. A family grapples with their mother's rapid decline, urging me not to "give up." I educate them regarding options, choices, and the principles of palliative care, reassuring them that honoring her wishes does not mean abandoning her—it means focusing on comfort and dignity. Another resident longs to return home to aging parents who can no longer care for him. Another beams with gratitude simply to be here, supported and safe, despite her medical challenges.

Moments of Joy

Between meetings with our attending physician, Dr. Malik—who has been an anchor here since 2019 and who administers to 80% of our residents—and countless medication reviews, case discussions, and calls to specialists, the hours slip by. Yet I always try to pause in the afternoon, to walk through the common spaces or The Home's beautiful garden. On good days, residents sit in the sun among the butterflies, laughing with staff and volunteers, or proudly showing off new glasses, a flu shot, or plans for our new home.



Clockwise from top: Dr. Patel with residents Al Allen and Cynthia Carter at Stories of Courage & Grace in 2024; spending time with resident Wes Ashberry in the Recreational Therapy department; participating in the OMA program in our Occupational Therapy department; Working on infectious disease control with Suzanne Patera, RN, Infection Preventionist and Gail Torres, RN, Nurse Manager.



Despite the demands of my role, I always make time for the moments that make The Virginia Home special. I'll participate in an art class, pause for a conversation with a resident about their favorite movie or book. I will even put on a costume at Halloween or participate in the annual Lip Sync battle over the holidays! These interactions are just as important as any clinical visit.

The Work and the Why

By evening, the paperwork returns, and I update notes so every team member and consulting physician stays aligned. As I finally walk toward the elevator, I hear a resident's music box playing softly nearby—a beloved resident sits waiting, as she often does, and I smile.

The work of a medical director is not glamorous. It is demanding, sometimes overwhelming, and never predictable. But it is also profoundly rewarding. Every small improvement—a rash resolved, a smile sparked by music, a safe return from the hospital—feels like a victory. My role is to balance policy with people, data with dignity, and medicine with meaning.

Tomorrow will bring another full day. More alarms, more charts, more hard decisions, and more quiet moments of joy. But as I step into the evening, I carry with me the reason I chose this work: to be the physician and the architect of care for some of the most vulnerable, and most inspiring, people I will ever know.

FROM THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES

By Laura Stewart, Chair

Dear Friends:

In 2002, I read my first Virginia Home newsletter. It was addressed to the previous owner of my house, but I was curious and then I was intrigued. I kept reading them each quarter, and the first thing I really remember was the Aquathon. It took me a while to find the free time, but when I did, I made my first visit to The Home. I began volunteering in Recreation Therapy at the Rec Cafe, serving coffee to residents.

I have had a ball in Rec Therapy over the years—residents pop in and out for coffee or to confirm plans for the day. I have brought my daughters and husband to visit at various times, and I love that they know some of the regulars (at least by name!)

The residents will often ask how my girls are in their respective far away lives, or if my husband is mad about the outcome of a recent football game.

There are staff members who have been there much longer than I have, and staff members who have joined in recent years. I like getting to know a little bit about everyone, and I love working with staff members toward a common goal, whether it's getting everyone a beverage and loading the dishwasher, or figuring out how to design and fund our new building.

I love being part of The Virginia Home community, even if it's just a small part. As I reflect upon the many wonderful experiences I have had at The Home and with the extraordinary people associated with it, I am humbled to be in this role. It's an honor to serve, and I love working with a team of people to further the mission of The Virginia Home.

Thank you for being a part of The Virginia Home community so many of us love so much!



From the Annual Fall Festival archives— one of our favorite photos of Laura Stewart with her friend and former resident, Mary Jane Montgomery.

Kindness—Nailed it!

Mark Conyard's Award Winning Heart

At The Virginia Home, we often say we are more than a workplace—we are a family. And no one embodies that spirit more than **Mark Conyard**, our Director of Maintenance and Environmental Services. For more than 25 years, Mark has been the steady hand, kind heart, and generous spirit behind so much of what makes our Home special.

Mark's role goes far beyond caring for a nearly 100-year-old building. He is just as likely to be found filling out football pools with residents, acting in a resident's play, or bringing laughter to the annual Boo House as he is troubleshooting a repair. He has personally driven residents home for holidays, supported families during special events, and gone out of his way to make sure both residents and staff are cared for in ways big and small. Whether it's picking up staff during snowstorms, jumping a dead car battery, or helping with a project at someone's home, Mark is always the first to step in—never expecting anything in return.

This year, his extraordinary kindness received well-deserved recognition. **Megan Portelos** nominated Mark for the "Acts of Kindness" Award with Channel 12, where his story was featured in a news segment. Along with the coverage came a monetary gift, a small token of appreciation for a man whose generosity has touched thousands of lives.



Mark with Megan Portelos.



Mark with resident Sandy Toot.

Mark's compassion shines in moments big and small. Just this summer, when Megan's HVAC broke during 100-degree heat and no repairman was available, Mark fixed it himself. With a child, pets, and a husband heading into surgery the next day, his kindness brought comfort when it was needed most—a reminder of how one act can change a life.

For more than 25 years, Mark has been the heart of The Virginia Home. His example inspires us all to be better to one another, and we are proud to celebrate him as part of our family.

Welcome Tracy!

Tracy Finds Her Forever Home

Tracy comes to us from Colonial Heights, Virginia, where she lived with the loving support of her sister and brother-in-law, **Tammy and Chuck Kopp**. Tammy, now retired, and Chuck, a contractor, provided both care and transportation, making sure Tracy always stayed active and connected.

When she learned she had a room available at The Virginia Home, Tracy described it as one of the happiest days of her life.

Before she even joined us as a resident, Tracy had already jumped into community life—joining our **Walk n' Roll 5K** event alongside Tammy and Chuck, and sharing her enthusiasm on our Facebook page.

Tracy is known for her friendliness and love of conversation. She enjoys reading, listening to music, and spending time with others. She is also an active member of Wesley United Methodist Church in Colonial Heights and holds a bachelor's degree in psychology. With longtime connections to friends of The Home, including Kathy Moore and former residents Margaret Moyer and Doug Farnsler, Tracy already feels right at home.

We are so excited to welcome Tracy and look forward to the energy, joy, and kindness she will share with our community!



SUPPORTING RESIDENT VOICES

The ability to communicate is one of the most powerful skills we have, and our Speech Therapy Department is dedicated to making sure every resident's voice is heard. While residents work with speech-language pathologists to improve their clarity, communication is always a two-way street—the listener plays an equally important role.

Here are some simple ways staff, visitors, and volunteers can support residents' communication:

- Face the resident and give your full attention. Notice their facial expressions, tone, body language, and gestures—these nonverbal cues say a lot.
- Reduce background noise. Kindly ask the resident to mute or turn off the TV, radio, or music to make conversation easier.
- Allow plenty of time. Let residents express their thoughts without rushing or interrupting.
- Confirm understanding. Repeat back what you heard so the resident can confirm or clarify their message.

Our residents work hard to communicate clearly. By taking a little extra time and care, we can ensure their voices are truly heard and valued. Thank you for helping us build strong connections and meaningful relationships with those we serve!

HOME TEAM HIGHLIGHTS

Behind the Scenes

OCCUPATONAL THERAPY: This fall at The Virginia Home has been full of creativity, learning, and fun. We wrapped up our second **Opening Minds through Art** cohort, “Dudes Do Art,” with 11 residents exploring their artistic sides. In **Creations with Shelley**, residents made bath bombs and friendship rocks to share with staff at the upcoming health fair. We also welcomed **South University** students from the Certified Occupational Therapy Assistant program for a hands-on presentation on Assistive Technology. Group TV games have taken off with the new Nex Playground, a motion-based console that gets everyone moving. Looking ahead, the holidays will bring handmade gifts for family, our popular **Lip Sync Battle**, and plenty of festive crafts.



Lee Coffin and Recreation Therapy team member Irene Harver teamed up for “Dudes Do Art.”

PHYSICAL THERAPY: October is National Physical Therapy Month, and we’re marking the occasion with fun ways to stay active! Residents will enjoy special exercise activities throughout the month, and staff will also have opportunities to join in the movement.

We’re also excited to officially welcome Jessica Anderson, LPTA, to our therapy team. Jessica joined us this summer and brings valuable experience from other nursing facilities—plus, she’s already a familiar face to some of our staff who have worked alongside her before. We’re thrilled to have her expertise and energy at The Virginia Home!

RECREATION THERAPY/COMMUNITY INTEGRATION: Our **Midweek Concert Series**, “Jammin’ in the Gym,” wrapped up on a high note with a performance by **Vertigo Band**, featuring our own **Jeff Morris** from the PT Department. Residents and staff alike had a blast celebrating the close of another successful season of music.

This September, four residents lived out their Disney dreams with a magical stay at a **Disney Resort**. Led by RT staff Sara Jarrett and Jody Young, Senior Director of Resident Services, along with Crystal Vaughan, LPN, and CNAs Rashanda Rowe and Briana Belton, the group explored Magic Kingdom, Hollywood Studios, Animal Kingdom, and Disney Springs—making memories to last a lifetime.

This summer, residents cheered on the **Flying Squirrels** in their final season at The Diamond. Looking ahead, November brings another favorite—Altria’s Broadway in Richmond season, featuring The Outsiders, Kimberly Akimbo, Beauty and the Beast, The Wiz, and more.

In July, we proudly celebrated **Disability Pride Month** with guest speaker **Matthew Shapiro** of 6 Wheels Consulting LLC. His presentation, “How To Become The Ultimate Determinator: Sharpening Your Life Skills To Maximize Your Every Day!” left residents and staff inspired by his motivating “MATTitudes” and practical tools for living as their best selves.

SOCIAL SERVICES: The Social Services team is excited to welcome fall after a busy summer. Several residents enjoyed **Camp Bruce McCoy**, **Camp Easterseals**, and **SOAR 365’s Camp Baker**—an effort that takes months of coordination with families, camp staff, payor sources, and our team. Year-round, we support residents with everything from emotional guidance and Medicaid renewals to advance care planning and even online shopping.

We stay connected through programs like the monthly **Residents’ Rights Group** and **Cerebral Palsy University**, and we’re thrilled to launch a new Dungeons & Dragons group led by social worker **Mikayla Perkins**. Inspired by a resident’s interest, Mikayla learned the rules, gathered supplies, and adapted the game to be fun and accessible for all.

This fall also featured a Residents’ Rights and Decision-Making presentation by **Dana W. Traynham** of the disAbility Law Center of Virginia, and a Compliment Booth at the Fall Festival where residents exchanged kind words, won prizes, and later received surprise compliments at their doors.

Looking ahead, we’ll assist residents with voting in the upcoming election and welcome families to the Family Council Meeting on Thursday, October 30, just before the Boo House event.



Resident Evie Raymo with Pluto and CNA Rashanda Rowe on our September Travel Scholarship trip to Disney.

VOLUNTEER SERVICES: In October, we look forward to welcoming back our Director of Volunteers, Annie Kennedy. We also look forward to the return of volunteers from U of R, Bon Secours Nursing and VCU. The Volunteer Department will be busy this Fall preparing for the Junior Board Clothes Closet and recruiting volunteers for the Fall Festival and the Halloween Boo House Social.



Maeve Kravitz gets a little Labrador Love during a recent visit from Caring Canines.

HEROES HELPING HEROES

Filling Packs & Lifting Hearts



This October, The Virginia Home Resident Council is teaming up with **The Mill House, Clubhouse for Survivors of Brain Injury**, to give back in a meaningful way. Together, they will assemble Hero Power Packs for **Connor’s Heroes**, an organization supporting children with cancer, their families, and the researchers working to conquer the disease.

For our residents, giving back is more than an activity—it’s a way to honor the community that has given them so much. Each Power Pack is filled with practical and comforting items designed to make a difficult time a little easier for families facing childhood cancer.

“This is one of the best ways we can make a difference,” shared a resident volunteer. “Knowing that something we put together can bring comfort and hope to a family—it just feels really good.”

Through this partnership, The Virginia Home and The Mill House show that even small acts of kindness can make a big impact. Every Power Pack assembled is a reminder that hope and support are strongest when communities come together.



A FOND FAREWELL

Susan Eads

After 33 years, it’s hard to imagine The Virginia Home without Susan. Social workers hold a unique place in the lives of our residents—standing beside them through the challenges of daily living, navigating complex systems, and celebrating milestones both big and small. Susan has done all of this with a heart wide enough to embrace the joys and struggles of others.

She has been the voice of encouragement, the calm in difficult moments, the one who could offer tough love when it was needed, and the spark of humor that made hard days a little lighter. For our residents, families, and staff, she has been not just a social worker, but a confidant, advocate, and friend.

Her colleague Jessi put it best: “I love hearing her stories about the good ol’ days of The Virginia Home—when she slept on the floor of the 6th floor during a snowstorm, or drove a resident three hours away so they could go to camp. I will truly miss this pillar of institutional knowledge, my confidant, and my friend.”

Susan’s legacy is woven into the fabric of TVH, and the lives she has touched will continue to feel her care long after her retirement. While we will miss her dearly, we celebrate this new chapter with her—and we can’t wait for the day she visits us again, hopefully with a new dog by her side! Congratulations, Susan, and thank you from the bottom of our hearts.



Happy Fall Y'all! Our Social Services team hold the "wheel of kindness" at our annual Fall Festival. Left to right: Director of Social Services and Admissions Jessi Young; Social Worker Mikayla Perkins, and retiring Social Worker Susan Eads.

Coming Attractions

Oct 10	Annual Fall Festival	Nov 26	Thanksgiving Worship Service
Oct 11	Hanover Concert Band	Dec 10	Junior Board Cupcake Party
Oct 16	Junior Board Clothes Closet	Dec 24	Christmas Eve Open House
Oct 30	Family Council Dinner	Dec 24	Christmas Eve Worship Service
Oct 30	Halloween Boo House & Social		All invited!

Please visit thevirginiahome.org for our weekly calendar!

Farewell Under the Lights

Honoring the Diamond in RVA

One of the final Fridays of summer carried a special weight as residents and staff gathered at The Diamond for its last Friday Night Game. The air was filled with nostalgia—the crack of the bat, the glow of the lights, and the collective memories of generations who cheered there. It was not just another ballgame, but the closing of a chapter in Richmond’s baseball history.

While we said goodbye to a beloved ballpark, the evening also stirred excitement for what’s to come. We’re already counting down the days until Opening Day at the new CarMax Park—the next chapter in Richmond’s baseball story. Designed with accessibility in mind, CarMax Park will feature wheelchair-accessible entrances, parking, and restrooms, along with additional improvements to ensure every fan can enjoy the game.

The inaugural game will take place on April 7, 2026 — and we hope to be there when the future of Richmond baseball begins.



Otto Critz shakes Nutasha’s paw and bids a fond farewell to The Diamond.



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