

Stanford business grads launch service so busy young adults can help aging parents

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Mon ami is a matching service for older adults. But itâ??s not for romance; it pairs them with college students for companionship. The start-up launched on the Peninsula and recently expanded to San Francisco and the Bay Area.



Joy Zhangâ??s and Madeline Dangerfieldâ??s project at Stanfordâ??s Graduate School of Business honed in the needs of young people who want to help their parents but never feel theyâ??re doing enough.

Founders Joy Zhang and Madeline Dangerfield met at an orientation for new students entering Stanfordâ??s Graduate School of Business. We knew how â??heart-breaking it can be for someone caring for their parents,â• said Zhang. â??They want to do good, but they feel theyâ??re never doing enough. â??We honed into the challenge of that place fraught with pain.â•

Zhang and Dangerfield devoted their school years to developing and testing their business model. When Zhang posted on Next Door, a social network based on neighborhoods, and received three

immediate responses, she knew they were on the right track.

Their first customer wanted someone to play Scrabble with a parent in a residential facility. It was their second customer who gave them their business name, which is French for my friend. It was a French professor who wanted to write a memoir. â??We found a companion to facilitate the conversation and offer tech help. She eventually began reaching out to his former students,â?• said Zhang.

Their project received top grades and, more importantly, piqued a number of investors.



Joy Zhang and Madeline Dangerfield with chief technical officer Steve Fram.

â??Mon ami really speaks to people who are caring for their own parents, Zhang said. â??Theyâ??re concerned about an older loved one becoming isolated and unengaged. Itâ??s a relief to the family when they know someone who cares is visiting their parent.â?•

Walks, talks and tech help

What children want, she said, is a companion for their parents, someone to take them on walks, listen their stories and talk with them.

Most of their referrals are word-of-mouth. But they get some from neighborhood Village programs and the Alzheimerâ??s help line. The San Francisco Village tries to use its own volunteers first, but often uses mon ami when people need tech help, said Jill Ellefsen, membership and volunteer coordinator.

â??Our volunteers do everything mon ami does, but sometimes theyâ??re more appropriate and more reliable,â?• she said. Their business is so well run.â?•

The San Francisco Village recommended mon ami to Sandy Church, 82, She has since had three helpers. â??Two were real winners; they were fantastic.â?• One helped her move things, another helped sort papers. â??The fellow who came yesterday helped with genealogy research. I asked him why he wants to hang out with an old person. He said he likes to help.â?•

When potential investors first heard about mon ami, they were skeptical that young people would want to spend time with older adults. But, little over a year since it began, mon ami has recruited more than 500 student companions from college campuses throughout the Bay Area and has made more than 200 matches.

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Appealing job; moneyâ??s not bad

â??Students want to engage and get off the campus bubble. They miss their family and grandparents,â?• Zhang said.

The pay doesnâ??t hurt. Mon ami charges $25 an hour, with $20 an hour going to the student companions, who are background-checked and must submit an activity summary and photo after every visit. Mon ami also has business liability insurance.

â??Recruiting students is easy, itâ??s an appealing job, an opportunity to gain experience and some money,â?• said Ying Liu, a companion and recently employed recruiter for mon ami.

Sandy moved her mom, Dorothy, from Sacramento to San Francisco after her motherâ??s house had been broken into. Initially, Dorothy was â??pretty independent, and could cook and get around,â?• she said. â??Now sheâ??s more limited in what she can do and where she can go.â?• (*mon ami policy does not allow use of clients last names, or interviews with the parents*).

Dorothy gets agitated, and Sandy wanted someone who could keep her calm and settled down. The traditional caregiving agencies all required a four-hour minimum and would only send someone with medical training. Sandy didnâ??t need that.

She wanted a fresh person to listen to her momâ??s stories â?? â??My mom was always a talkerâ?• â?? and who, unlike Sandy, hadnâ??t heard them all her life or point out what she had forgotten.â?•

Reaffirming family bonds

Mon ami matched then-20-year-old Gabby Pascual with 101-year-old Dorothy. The two visited twice a week for two hours a time for almost a year before Gabby graduated and moved home to Hawaii.

â??We had more formal activities toward the beginning of my visits, reading books, magazines, cooking, etc. As we got more familiar, I realized all Dorothy really wanted was someone to converse

with. So, as the months went on, we began talking more, exchanging stories and sharing photos. Dorothy her many albums and me with my iPhone.â?•

â??Gabby is a bright, shining star, always cheerful,â?• Sandy said. â??Sheâ??s genuinely interested in stories about life in old SF. Theyâ??ve formed such a bond. Itâ??s a great relationship. I feared that mom would be tired after two hours with Gabby, but sheâ??s invigorated.â?•

The visits also impacted Gabby, who took time off from preparing for the medical school exam to contact and visit with her own grandparents more.

Visiting Dorothy made me remember the importance of family bonds and the power of family memory. So, I began contacting my grandparents more, spending more face-to-face time with them when I was home, writing down their stories, and asking a bunch of questions about them and their families. â??

And, she added, the visits jut reaffirmed her desire to become a doctor.

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Ying Liu said recruiting students to work with older people is easy. â??Weâ??ll be there sometime.â?•

Ying Liu described the mon ami relationship as â??a two-way street.â?• Hiking around the city with one older man with early dementia introduced her to â??all these beautiful spots I would never know about.â?• And her time with an elderly Jewish man introduced her to Jewish literature and Yiddish music, which she discovered she really liked.

â??I love old people. I miss being with my elderly family members,â?• Ying said. â??As a society, we should be paying more attention to the aging population and their needs. There are so many isolated seniors. Weâ??ll be there sometime; weâ??ll be old, too.â?•

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Date Created
15/08/2019
Author
jgoddess

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