



A Note from Executive Director, Vicki Hickman

Adventures with Artificial Intelligence—and Waymo

It seems you can't turn on the television these days without hearing about the "dreaded" artificial intelligence (AI). Between the doom-and-gloom predictions and the futuristic robot takeovers, it's enough to make anyone nervous. Personally, when I start to feel anxious about something, my best remedy is to learn more about it. So, in an effort to replace fear with curiosity, I've spent the past year diving into AI—both at work and at home.

Fortunately, at Life Enriching Communities we're already using several AI-enhanced tools that make our work smarter, faster, and a little more fun. I've attended the optional training sessions and learned how these systems can improve efficiency and communication—and maybe even save a few headaches along the way.

At home, my adventures with AI are a bit more... personal. You might recall that I've mentioned my Alexa devices before. They recently received an upgrade and now seem to have more personality than ever. We actually have conversations now—though I'm still not sure who's getting the last word.

Then there's my "smart vacuum/mop," lovingly named Roxanne. My son-in-law brought her home, and I decided she deserved a name befitting her multitasking skills. Roxanne glides across the floor, vacuuming and mopping simultaneously. I have no idea how she decides when to sweep versus mop, but I trust her judgment—my floors have never looked better.

Last week, AI and I took our relationship on the road when Todd and I traveled to Austin, Texas for the National Aging Services Risk Management Conference. Todd, being recently retired and always up for an adventure, came along for the ride.

While exploring the city, we stopped at a café near Barton Springs Pool, and Todd spotted something curious: a sleek, driverless car labeled "Waymo." Within thirty seconds, the Boomer had Googled it and learned it was an autonomous vehicle service through Uber. His eyes lit up. "We have to do this!" he said. And just like that, our first AI-powered ride was underway.

Finding Waymo, however, turned out to be a bit like playing hide and seek with a robot. We followed the app's map, circling buildings until we finally found the car waiting patiently... one block away. As we approached, my phone connected via Bluetooth and unlocked the doors. A glowing "VH" on top greeted us—nice touch, Waymo! I couldn't decide if I was proud of this high-tech adventure or guilty for putting some poor human driver out of work.

Our second Waymo ride was equally entertaining. Just as we reached the pickup spot, it decided to roll 50 feet up a hill and stop in traffic. We had to sprint uphill, dodging honking cars to catch our ride. The good news? Once we were in, it drove safely—almost too safely.

Later, we decided to use Waymo again to visit the much-recommended Terry Black's Barbecue. At 5 p.m., Austin's rush-hour traffic was in full swing. Waymo pulled to the hotel exit and waited. And waited. And waited. Generous drivers waved us on, but the car politely declined every invitation. Fifteen minutes later, I told Todd, "If that light turns red one more time, I'm getting out and walking." Thankfully, another Waymo showed up, and ours finally took the hint. Forty minutes and 1.2 miles later, we arrived—just in time for dinner.

After a delicious meal, we decided our legs were the better option and walked back to the hotel, pausing to watch the Mexican free-tailed bats emerge from under the Congress Avenue Bridge at sunset. It was a spectacular sight and a perfect end to our AI adventure.

Pickup hiccups aside, I must admit—Waymo impressed me. The car's screen showed what it "saw": bikes, scooters, pedestrians, and traffic patterns. We could even select our own music. Cameras and microphones monitored the interior, though we're assured "they" aren't listening (fingers crossed). Still, for all its technology, Waymo lacks one very human trait—the ability to take a deep breath, assess the risk, and boldly merge into rush-hour traffic.

So, while I'll continue to embrace AI at work and home, I'm convinced that some things—like driving in downtown Austin—are still better left to humans. Until then, I'll keep learning, laughing, and letting Roxanne handle the floors. She's the only robot I truly trust.

-Vicki