

Using Artistry to Inspire

Self-Expression

Splashes of color on creative artwork. Tantalizing aromas of freshly baked cookies. Ballet—or flamenco or mambo—flavored exercises. Dancing sunbeams on walls, tables, faces. Heartbeat rhythms around a drum circle. Quiet chuckles over a sandwich.

The North Shore Senior Center's House of Welcome Adult Day Services day program creates a calm, cheerful, respectful, and safe environment for adults with memory loss due to dementia. Cynthia Phon, LCSW, is director of the House of Welcome and oversees an energetic, skilled team that includes creative arts therapists, social workers, counselors, a registered nurse, certified nursing assistants, and more than 30 volunteers. The House of Welcome day program boasts a high staff-to-participant ratio, and many staff are master's-level professionals.



Creative arts therapies are an integral and unique aspect of the adult day services program, enhancing quality of life for each of the 30-plus daily participants. Each of the therapies—art, dance/movement, and music—uses specialized activities of the discipline to address physical, emotional, cognitive, and social needs of the individual participants. The expressive activities that therapists offer don't rely solely on verbal processing, they also build on what the person can do, maximizing abilities in memory, language, and cognition. Participants are able to express such emotions as joy, anger, sadness, and frustration through creative activities. And, the socialization of the group experience counteracts the emotional and physical isolation that can occur as relationships in the community start to fade away.

Process Not Product

According to Cynthia, "Our approach with all activities is the process, not the product. Persons with dementia have the same

human needs that we all do, and when cognitive function is compromised, it often includes language impairment, which can reduce the ability to communicate verbally." But participants can find pleasure and a sense of well-being from creative arts activities.

Depending on the progression of the dementia, participants may face barriers to accomplishing routine tasks. Adult day services activities are adapted for persons with dementia, thus validating participants and respecting their dignity as adults. Activities reinforce memories, skills, and values that might have been important to them in earlier years. Cynthia said, "Success to us is seeing that participants are enjoying themselves and engaged in an activity—even if it's not in the same way as in the past."

Artmaking with a Purpose

Joanne* was restless and anxious about where her husband was and whether her children were nearby, believing they were



still youngsters. Enter Fredelyn “Fred” Calla, LCPC, ATR, art therapist. She encouraged Joanne to attend an art therapy group, which kept her engaged the entire time. She focused on the activity, rather than her anxiety.

Fred uses a variety of projects to engage participants in a group or individualized activity. One day it’s sketching; another day it might be painting. Or perhaps making collages, knitting, or creating clay sculptures. “Whatever the project,” said Fred, “there is no right or wrong. The artwork doesn’t have to be complete or considered pleasing to the eye in order to be a valuable expression of that person’s emotions.”

Describing a participant who had an art background, Fred commented, “I suggested art group to him because he enjoyed copying beautiful paintings in an individual art activity. In the first weeks, he responded based on the directives and included meticulous details. Now there are not as



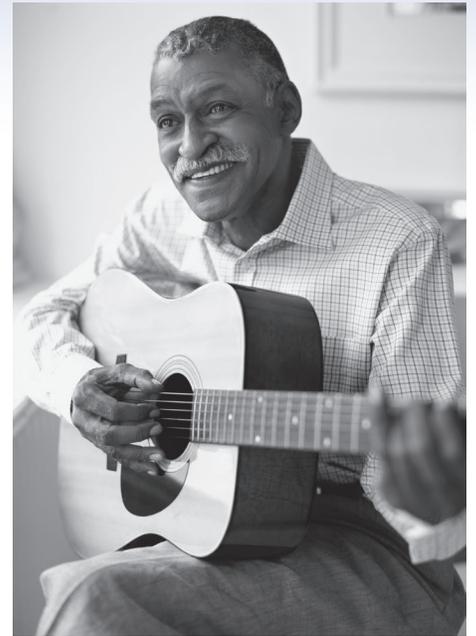
many details.” And no matter what the directive is now, he paints the same thing over and over—the house where he once lived. He has become tearful when he talks about his home. “If he had not been able to express that in art,” said Fred, “we never would have seen that part of this person.”

Moving to the Rhythm

Each day at the House of Welcome Adult Day Services, one of the dance/movement therapists—Jennifer Bacani, MA, R-DMT, or Elise Moore, MA, R-DMT—leads an exercise group and other activities that reinforce the mind-body connection. Individuals with dementia can feel misunderstood or undervalued, and Jennifer and Elise provide healthy, dignified ways for participants to express a variety of emotions.

Physical and personal limitations, as well as progression of the dementia, impact how participants respond to the music, but the core individual shines through. In the early days of her participation in dance therapy groups, Lucille* could get up and stand on her own, gracefully moving with the music, much as she did as a trained ballet dancer. As her dementia progressed, she needed more assistance and her motions became more hesitant. Elise said, “Her movement signature was the same, though, even as her repertoire of movements decreased. Lucille’s personality was there and the stamp of her training was clear.”

Jennifer also leads a dance therapy group in the twice-a-week Mind Matters program for people with early memory loss. “Because participants are in the early stages of memory loss,” said Jennifer, “I can talk with them about what we’re doing and why. For example, ‘This movement is good for memory because it stimulates both sides of the brain.’” Her aim is to make dance therapy fun, so she might incorporate graceful ballet or lively flamenco moves into an exercise to improve balance.



Music to Empower and Energize

Music therapist Brea Murakami, MT-BC,** saw in her own home that a person with dementia could respond to and interact with music. Her grandmother, who had Alzheimer’s disease, once came into the room where Brea was practicing carols at the piano. “She sat down beside me and started singing along. I saw that music was preserved in her brain and that part wasn’t touched by the disease.” Whether the activity is composing, listening, or playing, the music serves as a channel to express emotions. “The aim is not to sound great and hit the right notes,” said Brea. The activity itself can support the strengths of the person with dementia, generating pleasure and a sense of energy.

In a music therapy group, melodies and rhythms that inspired participants in their youth can evoke pleasant memories. This contributes to stress reduction and participants can enjoy the company of others. Brea initiated a discussion in one group about occasions when “Hava Nagila” would be sung, thus prompting the memories of Jewish participants about their Bat or Bar Mitzvah. “How were you feeling then?” she asked. The tune became a musical cue to grasp other memories that might not have surfaced.

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House of Welcome Therapists **Nathan Cain and Fredelyn Calla** (back row)
Elise Moore and Jennifer Bacani (front row)

Working Together to Promote Well-being

The mutual respect each creative arts therapist has for other disciplines fosters the collaborative approach they take. They are mission-oriented and focused on participants, making everything that happens at the adult day services program during a day into a therapeutic activity.

“The therapists are generalists as well as specialists,” said Cynthia, “and use their clinical skills to guide participants throughout the day.” Each brings therapeutic components specific to their discipline to the day’s activities, suggesting ways to incorporate music techniques into other activities, for example, or taking a dance and movement approach while helping participants set the table.

The therapists also combine their skills to create group activities. For instance, Elise and Jennifer sometimes work with Fred to

create a dance/art activity. Not long ago, they organized a ballet-themed group. They encouraged participants to move to ballet-type music while an art group in the corner worked on Impressionist-style paintings à la Degas, who is celebrated for his dance-themed creations.

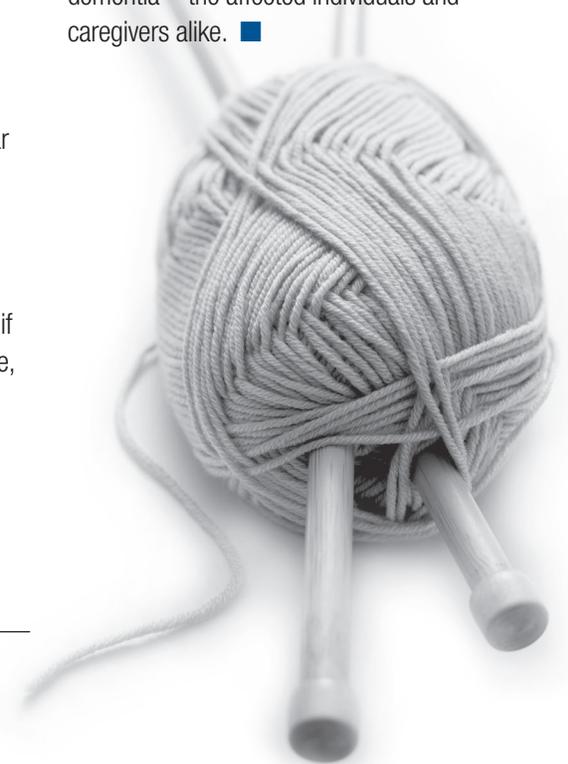
Being in the Moment

Jennifer said, “We do an excellent job of being in the moment, asking how a particular motion feels or asking a participant ‘How did you feel when you met your husband?’ because we noted her smile while she was listening to a romantic tune.” Therapists have learned about participants’ pasts. So, if that same person were to have no response, staff could pick up on body language and say, “It must be hard to not remember how you felt. What does love feel like?” When a participant feels emotionally safe and when her responses are valued, she feels empowered to express more.

Persons with dementia may have trouble initiating things, but they respond to cuing and prompting. In a recent art therapy group, Fred used verbal suggestions and photos to encourage a couple of participants who were unable to recall an image in response to “paint or draw something that gives you joy.” She commented, “Some have lost that ability to think in the abstract and need concrete clues.”

As they work with individuals whose declining abilities are evident, therapists acknowledge that they have to manage their own sense of sadness and loss. Jennifer said, “I try to remember to just be in the moment. I am having a beautiful experience in this moment. That is side by side with the sadness.”

Perhaps in the near future, neurotechnology will have illuminated the causes of dementias and lead researchers to a cure. In the meantime, programs like the House of Welcome Adult Day Services and Mind Matters program for individuals with early memory loss that utilize a variety of clinical and research-based techniques are important to the well-being of those impacted by dementia—the affected individuals and caregivers alike. ■



*Names have been changed and other details altered to protect privacy.

**Brea is pursuing graduate work in music therapy, and Nathan Cain, BFA, MT, now is the music therapist.