

# Sarah Jackson...On Carin Memory Loss



**Sarah Jackson, LCSW**, started her career at North Shore Senior Center 11 years ago as an intern in Senior and Family Services. She came on board full-time as a case manager for four years, and then moved over to House of Welcome (HOW) Adult Day Services as a volunteer coordinator for the Day Program for people living with Alzheimer's disease and other dementias. In 2015, Sarah was promoted to program manager of the Day Program.

We sat down with Sarah to gain insight into her experiences working with the participants and their families.

## **Explain what you do at HOW.**

The short answer is all of us on staff do everything we can to ensure our participants have an enjoyable day and are well-cared for. As program manager, I manage the Day Program. I supervise a multidisciplinary staff of six, and support them so they have what they need to do their jobs to the best of their abilities. I trouble-shoot with staff

members and advise them on different ways to approach situations that arise. I train and orient new staff members. I also participate in care plan meetings with family members to discuss participants' needs, how they are doing at home, any changes in their cognitive or functional abilities, personal care, eating patterns, etc.

## **Walk us through a typical day at HOW's Day Program.**

While we have a daily schedule, there is no typical day in the Day Program. There is predictability, but every day is different when working with people with memory loss.

The day starts with coffee, reading the newspaper, saying hello, and getting settled. Then, we go over the day's schedule which is written on a big white board so everyone can see what's going on and what's coming up. Mid-morning we break into small groups for various activities such as baking, poetry, art therapy, creative story-telling or spirituality discussion. Before lunch, we have two exercise groups. The afternoons offer music activities, which are very popular, as well as dance movement therapy, travel discussion and trivia. We always offer choices as we feel it's important for the participants to have choices and feel validated.

## **Do you see a difference in participants' demeanors from when they start attending the Day Program to when they've been coming for a while?**

Family members say participants seem more relaxed, more verbal and better functioning at home after spending a day with us. Some participants new to the program take to it right away and are happy to be here. For some, it can take a while to warm up to the new environment. After participants have been

in the program for a while we observe more enthusiasm, and they become more talkative and engaging. One participant, for example, would get flustered at first when someone said hello to her. Over time, she became very comfortable and outgoing.

## **What are some of your more challenging situations?**

We work with people with different types and varying degrees of dementia. For example, Alzheimer's disease has different symptoms than other forms of cognitive impairment. Behavioral issues vary as well. Some people experience loss of language; some experience physical changes; and some develop spatial or visual issues. Some people don't even realize they have memory issues. And then there are those participants who lose social screening skills, and they can become disruptive or use profanity. We also have a wide range in age—our oldest participant is 92 and our youngest is 53. So meeting the needs of everyone on a given day can be challenging but, fortunately, we have a very talented staff and constantly adjust our interventions as participants change. We are very in tune with each other, so much so that a simple look from across the room can indicate one of us needs support with a participant. In an environment like ours, it's key that our staff is connected at all times.

## **What goes on behind the scenes of the Day Program?**

A lot! The staff spends a considerable amount of time planning dignified and creative activities for our participants. We don't produce cookie cutter activities. Instead, our talented and highly-educated staff develops a lot of sophisticated, original programming for our participants. Our participants have experienced a musical theater group, gardening

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and sensory activities, and art and dance appreciation, to name a few. We've also had travel discussions which can prompt reminiscence, and dance classes where participants have taken a whirl at disco, the waltz and even Bollywood-inspired dance. We also have a strong emphasis on creative arts therapies.

The needs of the participants change on a regular basis and they vary so much from individual to individual that we kind of have to be detectives sometimes to figure out what someone needs in a given moment. We are also very careful about how we handle the personal care of participants. It's important, too, that we honor people's dignity, so we handle these situations with much discretion and respect.

We also offer ongoing family support, and there's a lot of paperwork and planning that go into each day. Our Clinical Manager Mary Lu Osterberg conducts tours for prospective families, and then meets with them to get the participants' histories and paperwork for new enrollments. She acquires key information on new participants such as favorite memories and family history as well as any trigger points we need to be aware of. A good example is some of our

participants are Holocaust survivors so the jingling of keys can possibly trigger anxiety and fear. As facilitators of the Day Program, we need to know these things.

Some staff members work with both the Day Program and Mind Matters, our program for people with early memory loss. So *a lot* goes on behind the scenes in making sure both programs are well thought out and planned for with staff.

## What's the most gratifying aspect of your work?

For me, it's our team. We depend so much on each other throughout the day. When I think about what we accomplish each day and the way we pull together, I feel a strong sense of pride. I also find it encouraging when participants can articulate what this place means to them; when they convey their appreciation for being here with us. That makes it all worth it.

## What has been one of your most rewarding experiences with a participant of the Day Program?

There have been many, but one that stands out is a younger participant who was not

aware that he had memory loss. He didn't want to come to the Day Program because he saw that he was much younger than the other participants. He eventually agreed to come to help in the kitchen as a "volunteer." Over time, he looked forward to coming "to work" and took pride in his role as assistant to the kitchen staff. As his disease progressed, we did our best to support him so he could continue to help out as he was able.

## What would you tell someone who's considering a Day Program for a loved one but they are on the fence?

I would encourage families to give it a try! Some take to it right away and for others the transition can take longer. Over time, more often than not, it's a wonderful environment for someone with memory loss. It's a place where people living with dementia don't have to worry about being wrong, and they are accepted the way they are. It also benefits the caregiver who gains respite from their caregiving responsibilities. It's a win-win for everyone.

