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Memory as a lifeline

Local 'Artstreams' program helps persons at-risk for cognitive loss find vital connections

By Laura Bulkin

Imagine finding yourself with the responsibility of caring for an aging loved one — a parent, a grandparent, a spouse — a loved one who seems every day more remote from the person you've always known. A person now struggling with Alzheimer's, or any of the dozens of cognitive impairments generally grouped under the catch-all heading of "dementia."

We like to think that such people are receiving professional care in some type of nursing facility; but here in Taos, the reality is that the overwhelming majority are cared for by family members, at home.

The overburdened health-care system cannot provide enough support to these patients or their caregivers, and navigating the system's complex rules can be a full time job in itself. The caregivers are often stressed to the breaking point, their own health and wellbeing put at risk.

This was the situation encountered by Kathleen Burg when she began directing the non-denominational Chesed program for seniors at the Taos Jewish Center. "Someone called looking for a support group for the families," Burg said. "I contacted the Alzheimer's Association and was told that there was no such group in Taos. But they were offering a series of workshops called 'Caring for the Caregiver.' I went to those, and then I was invited by the association to start a support group here."

That was in 2009, and there are original members from that time who still attend meetings now. Judy (last name omitted for privacy) has found the group to be a lifeline during six years caring for two family members. "It's been so valuable in helping us cope with the changes. Learning about others' experiences, you realize you're not the only one, you're not alone." She speaks appreciatively about the opportunities that Burg has made available to them.

"Kathleen is incredibly skilled, not only as a facilitator for the support group, but in constantly finding new things to share with us. She introduced us to the Savvy Caregiver program, which has been so beneficial. And last summer we went to Santa Fe for an Alzheimer's education workshop where we heard a wonderful variety of speakers."

While searching for more resources, Burg said she became aware of an initiative at New York's Museum of Modern Art geared toward bringing people with dementia and their families into the Museum to interact with the paintings.

That was the genesis for "Artstreams: From the Well of Memory."

In conjunction with museums and galleries all over Taos, "Artstreams" offers the "Meet Us at the Museum" program. Sessions are set up, and specific works of art are pre-selected for the event. Curators or educators may offer information about the artwork.

Then the participants are invited to observe, listen and respond, taking turns expressing anything that comes to mind: How the artwork makes them feel, what meaning it has for them.

“We have a great time, and we laugh so hard,” Burg said. “The art elicits storytelling. It can trigger an emotional key to open a locked memory.”

She recalls numerous instances where a participant’s response to a painting inspired a breakthrough in long-term memory, providing family members with some precious puzzle- piece of their family history. “We’ve been taught to view Alzheimer’s as a grim march toward death with no reprieve, but this is just not the case. The brain is very elastic. When you lose one ability, it makes up for it with other connectors and receptors. Creativity doesn’t go away with memory loss. It can even be enhanced.”

Museum administrators have embraced the program. “We love to see the mission of the Taos Art Museum at Fechin House at work in hosting the ‘Artstreams’ group,” says director-curator Susan Fisher. “They show me a wonderful openness. The artwork touches each one in a way that reminds me why museums exist in the first place: To ensure access to the enjoyment of art and the way it embraces all our individual stories in one shared, grand, human expression.”

Jayne Schell, coordinator of educational programming at the Harwood Museum in Taos, agrees. “We’ve hosted several times, and we love to have this population come to the Harwood.”

Artstreams depends upon grants, donations, and the tireless work of volunteers. The Taos Community Foundation and St. James Episcopal Women have been key supporters from the beginning. “We couldn’t do this without them,” Burg acknowledges, “and all of our venues which have been so generous and welcoming.” In addition to the Harwood and Fechin House, these include the Millicent Rogers Museum, Taos Fire Department, Taos Center for the Arts, Victor Goler Gallery and Steve Parks Gallery.

In her years of assisting Alzheimer’s patients and their families, Burg said she has developed a “toolbox” for maintaining cognitive health into old age. Some key suggestions she shares with us: Eating dark chocolate pumps dopamine, which helps with learning and memory.

Choose a song to memorize. Learn to play an instrument. Find an activity you like to do, and take it to the next level.

Use your non-dominant hand — for example, brush your teeth with your left hand if you’re right-handed. Exercise, and eat more of a Mediterranean diet.

Burg encourages caregivers to enter into the “altered” reality of the person with Alzheimer’s, rather than telling them that what they’re saying is “wrong” or untrue. “We need to start looking at cognitive impairment in a different way,” she says. “Aging is about compromise and adjustment. You might not be able to do a particular activity, but you find one you can do, and do that. It can be an incredibly creative process.”

Upcoming "Meet Us at the Museum" events are planned for Tuesday (March 3) at the Fechin, and March 25 at the Harwood. Advance reservations are required. All who wish to participate in "Artstreams," or in the Caregivers' Support Group, are asked to call Burg directly at (575) 758-4692.