

# Artstreams offers the benefits of art to people with dementia and their caregivers

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On the second Wednesday of the month, a small group gathers at different museums around Taos for the Meet Us at the Museum program, led by Artstreams: From the Well of Memory director Kathleen Burg. Artstreams is a Taos-based non-profit that works with caregivers of people with dementia to provide support and offer opportunities to form community.

While working as the director of the Chesed Project at the Taos Jewish Center in 2008, Burg received a call asking for information for a support group for caregivers of people with dementia in Taos. Finding that there was none, she decided to create her own. In addition to the Meet Us at the Museum program, Artstreams also hosts a monthly confidential support group for caregivers.

"You tend to find that the average person who's not going through it can't necessarily relate truly... It's a difficult path being a caregiver in general and then on top of that [being] a caregiver of dementia is just super daunting," one caregiver who takes care of her mother said. She asked that she remain anonymous for privacy reasons. "To find a group where you're sitting among people who are experiencing the same... it's really helpful."

The most recent data from the Alzheimer's Association reports that there are currently 43,000 New Mexico residents 65 and older who suffer from Alzheimer's disease, a number projected to grow to 53,000 by 2025. Additionally, 85,000 people in the state work as unpaid caregivers for their family members.

Burg, who has a background in non-profit work, senior care and arts education, was intrigued by an article she read about a program MoMA was starting to offer family caregivers of people with dementia access to art and museums. "I thought, 'Well, I want to do that. I could do that here in Taos,'" she said.

Due to the lack of effective pharmacological treatments to cure dementia, some researchers

have turned towards psychosocial alternatives like art therapy as a means of improving the quality of life of people with dementia. While acknowledging the difficulty of quantifying the positive benefits of art on people with dementia, a study published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* nonetheless argued that "creative processes are used to evoke memories, enable people to communicate about their experience, to reinforce identity, and to strengthen relationships with their own family members, as well as with care personnel and others involved in the intervention process."

Meet Us at the Museum sometimes incorporates a musical element as well, another art form shown to benefit people with dementia.

At the most recent meeting of Meet Us at the Museum on June 14, Burg brought the group — family caregivers with their partners or parents — to the Centennial exhibition at the Harwood Museum of Art. Burg selects the works she wants the group to look at. "Typically, for the group, I see what catches me, what communicates, paintings that can really communicate... so that's how I choose — what speaks to me with my understanding of what they need," she said.

After giving a brief history of the museum, Burg asked people to walk around, look at the art, and decide what painting most appeals to them.

"I discuss history, the background of the artist. The educational inclusion is important to me. Although most of the work is representational, the group has done very well with modern art and sculpture. They can find something to converse about in everything," Burg said over email.

In addition to the Harwood, Burg also hosts Meet Us at the Museum events at the Millicent Rogers Museum, the Taos Art Museum at Fehin House and the Taos Firehouse Art Collection, among others.

"We think of the museum as a space where community can come together... offering space and



COURTESY PHOTO

Attendees enjoy music and art at the Harwood Museum of Art.

time for families to do something together that is outside of the day-to-day routines of caregiving and the stressors that are around that," Gwen Fernandez, Curator of Education and Public Programs at the Harwood, said.

As Burg led a discussion about the various paintings in the room, she encouraged people to use concrete, specific language to talk about what they were seeing. People chimed in to point out elements of paintings that they liked, as well as to share personal experiences that the paintings brought up for them.

"Art provides a visual gateway into the emotional world," Fernandez explained. In her own experience with these kinds of programs, she's found that certain kinds of art are more effective at engaging with people with memory problems, specifically paintings with "a figurative, a narrative, or some kind of natural [element] or... object that is memory-rich."

During the conversation, one man saw a double rainbow in a painting and was reminded of seeing a rainbow at his home a few days prior. Burg wants to facilitate a discussion that leaves room for anything from storytelling to pointing out a specific texture or color that catches someone's eye.

"Having the visual connection might spark a memory or a story

or just simply an engagement verbally," Karen Chertok, the director of education at Millicent Rogers, explained.

"Art in general is so experiential. It's kind of how the person receives the art, so however you receive it you can't be wrong," the caregiver said. "I think that's really nice for the person with dementia and the person who's a caregiver because anything goes. They're going to be okay speaking up and not being embarrassed or anything like that."

Dementia can be isolating both for the person with the disease and the caregiver, so the social benefit of the program is also hugely impactful. "It's a social outing for them. It gives them a place and time to be somewhere, and structure," Fernandez said. "It gives them a community of people who are experiencing their own version of this illness."

"They come, they dress up — it's an event," Burg said. "They get to talk with the staff, talk with each other [and] learn about the art."

"My mom talks about it after and talks about it before and looks forward to it," the caregiver said. Her mother had a career as an artist, so talking about art is "right up her alley."

"The experience of taking her there is just wonderful. She just loves it," she added.