

TOUR GIVES GLIMPSE INTO WHAT DEMENTIA PATIENTS EXPERIENCE

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(DEVIN WEEKS/Hagadone News Network) Dementia Coach and Virtual Dementia Tour volunteer Ali Spahn prepares Coeur d'Alene firefighter Chris Kieres to enter the experience room of the tour Wednesday at the Lodge in Coeur d'Alene.

COEUR D'ALENE — Trying to perform easy, everyday tasks becomes frustrating and almost unbearable for those who go on the Virtual Dementia Tour.

Participants experience garbled input and perception as well an inability to communicate. They have the sense that they should be able to do something as simple as setting a dinner table, but even this becomes difficult and defeating.

"I've been in this field 21 years, working with dementia specifically, and I still learned something," said Kerri Sandifer, a care facility owner and case manager who experienced the tour Wednesday morning. "You just don't understand until you go through it."

The Lodge Assisted Living in Coeur d'Alene is now offering the Virtual Dementia Tour, a program that allows people to see through the eyes of dementia and Alzheimer's disease patients.

During the tour, participants have their senses altered to understand how dementia is more than just memory loss.

"Just because you don't have dementia doesn't mean you don't have feelings," said Rick Bennett, a certified dementia practitioner with the Dementia Coach, a local dementia resource. "They have hopes, they have dreams, they have aspirations just like you and I do. They're no different. I want to bring awareness to the fact that these are people just like you and I. I think they're so misunderstood."

Bennett said by walking in the shoes of a dementia patient, loved ones and caregivers are able to understand more clearly what they are going through, allowing for stronger understanding and empathy.

He said he asked one caregiver who went through an early tour Tuesday how this would help her be a better caregiver.

"Her No. 1 response was, 'I am now going to have more empathy and understanding and patience,' and that's what it takes," he said. "It's very difficult to work with someone who can't communicate. It's like a child."

About 40 people came to the media day Wednesday, and at least 200 are expected to come through by the end of the week.

"You know in 'Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade' and he says, 'Dad, what did you get out of it?' and he goes, 'Illumination?'" said Linda Davis, the Lodge's director of building relationships. "That's what I'm looking for."

Joel Loiacono, regional director for the Alzheimer's Association Washington State Chapter, said the tour is a great education tool.

"We're not born knowing how to do this. A lot of times we get frustrated with our loved ones — 'she's doing it on purpose, how come she can't do something simple as put a battery in a flashlight or pour out pills,'" he said. "It's hard to empathize with people when you are not going through it."

The Virtual Dementia Tour was created by PK Beville about 20 years ago and has become an international nonprofit operating in 20 countries.

"We've done over 2 billion of these tours," Bennett said. "This isn't some little deal. This is a big, big deal."

Information: [thedementiacoach.com](http://www.thedementiacoach.com) (<http://www.thedementiacoach.com>)