

http://tbrnews.com/news/this-south-bay-resident-aims-to-set-a-new-standard/article_3794e89a-3bb1-11ea-8446-bf56741b9b9b.html

This South Bay resident aims to set a new standard of care for those with memory impairment

By Melissa Heckscher
Jan 22, 2020



Family Connect Care's Laura Mahakian (at left) and Mary Lou Giebel, director of care, chat with resident Penny Bolton. (Photo by Melissa Heckscher)

Four times a week, 85-year-old Ron Kraft drives from his senior living community in Waleria to a cozy one-story home in West Torrance where his wife of 56 years now lives.

They can't live together anymore—not since Alzheimer's took its heavy hold. But she's happy. And that's enough.

“I do everything I can to make her feel good, and that gives me a great deal of satisfaction,” said Kraft, whose wife, Rosemary, developed Alzheimer’s 15 years ago at the age of 70. “We listen to music. We like to dance with our arms.”



Ron Kraft visits with his wife Rosemary, a Alzheimer's patient at a private specialized memory care home in Torrance. (Photo by Melissa Heckscher)

Kraft moved his wife, a former TWA flight attendant, to the specialized memory care home on 226th Street when he decided the dedicated memory facility at Sunrise (where he lives) wasn't enough.

“The people [at Sunrise] are great but it’s just a numbers thing,” Kraft said. “They don’t have as many people to spend time with each person.”

That’s where senior care specialist Lauren Mahakian came in. Mahakian runs the weekly dementia support group Kraft attends at the Peninsula Center Library in Palos Verdes—and she also owns Family Connect Care, a network of in-home care specialists and memory care homes dedicated to seniors living with Alzheimer’s and other forms of dementia.

“Lauren knows more about people with memory care problems than any doctor or neurologist that I’ve met,” Kraft said. “She treats each one of those people with a lot of dignity. A lot of people don’t.”

Mahakian, a Rancho Palos Verdes resident, isn’t one to shy away from a challenge.

Since opening her first memory care home in 2017, the certified dementia practitioner has opened two more customized memory care homes—with another four set to open by the end of the year. She also plans to open a dementia day care program on Palos Verdes Peninsula by late 2020 and a state-of-the-art assisted living home in 2021.

“The norm for a six-bedroom [senior] home is old people sitting in lounge chairs with blankets over them and no one talking to them,” she said. “So I feel like I’m setting a new standard.”

Mahakian’s “new standard” means there is one staff member for every two residents. It means everyone from the chef to the activities coordinator is certified in dementia care—and that the roster of daily activities include Mahakian’s trademarked “Stimuli” program, which uses sensory stimulation to help decrease anxiety, boost mood and sharpen focus.

It also means everything from the height of the beds and the size of the showers to the type of flooring and colors on the walls have been carefully considered.

And, perhaps most importantly, it means residents can—to an extent—live life on their terms instead of someone else’s.



Certified dementia practitioner Lauren Mahakian is aiming to set a new standard for senior memory care by increasing the ratio of care givers to patients and by engaging patients in activities or passions from when they were younger. (Photo by Melissa Heckscher)

Take Penny, 92, who likes to have her makeup done and hair curled before breakfast. Or Colleen, 95, who “loves her Costco hot dogs” and has them delivered by care staff on days she decides to opt out of the evening’s menu.

“We are able to bring back what they once enjoyed,” Mahakian said. “It’s all about empowering them, giving back independence, and giving back a sense of purpose.”

From senior home worker to advocate

Mahakian’s purpose is clear. In 2006, after working as a senior care manager, she walked out of a large-scale senior home and made a silent promise to herself: To make something better.

“I saw a lot of things that just really affected me,” Mahakian said. “I would come home at night and I’d say, ‘One day I’m going to do it, and I’m going to do it like no one else can. And no one will ever be able to replicate what I have.’”

She opened Family Care Connect in 2008 with its mission to offer comprehensive care to seniors living with Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and other forms of dementia.

She had another mission as well: To support family members struggling to cope with the vast challenges of taking care of affected loved ones. Consequently, she formed support groups throughout the South Bay area; she makes herself available to her clients at all hours of the day; and she has a free podcast called "Unlocking the Doors of Dementia" available on Spotify.

"I don't know anyone who can do what she does," said Myra Katsuki, a San Francisco resident who hired Mahakian to care for her aging parents in Marina del Rey. Before contacting Family Connect Care, Katsuki's father had been in a nursing home where he "wasn't getting any attention." Mahakian helped arrange for in-home care instead.

"[Before finding Lauren] I had asked the hospital and the nursing home for assistance and they gave me pieces of paper with lists and said, 'You can pick one of these,'" Katsuki said. "It was beyond overwhelming."

"When I gave Lauren a call, she just got right to work," she continued. "She helped me with the transition to getting him home and getting him care at home."

High cost of care

But caring for someone with memory issues is not cheap.

According to the annual Genworth Cost of Care Survey, which follows the varying costs of caring for individuals with Alzheimer's, the average cost of caring for Alzheimer's patients in the Los Angeles area ranges between \$5,000 and \$10,000 per month depending on whether the person is getting in-home or private nursing home care.

Generally, insurance or Medicaid pays only for a small fraction—if any—of dementia care, which makes for a heavy financial strain on top of an already weighty emotional burden.

"It's emotional, it's physical, it's financial," said Susan Howland, the programs director of the Alzheimer's Association California Southland. "It is a long journey for the family."

And the numbers are only getting worse.

Today, 5.8 million Americans are living with Alzheimer's, the most common form of dementia, with that number predicted to rise to 14 million by 2050, according to the Alzheimer's Association.

"This is the first time in history where it's not uncommon to live into our 80s and 90s, and that is when there's the highest risk [for dementia]," Howland said. "This is also the first time our society is recognizing that changes in cognition as we get older are not just a natural aging process."

One in three seniors today dies with some form of dementia, the Alzheimer's Association said, making it a more common cause of death than breast cancer and prostate cancer combined.

"We used to think, with someone who is older and forgetful, that they were just getting older or just senile, but this is not necessarily a normal part of aging," Howland said.

The Alzheimer's Association has a 24-hour support line (1-800-272-3900) for anyone who needs help or has questions about the disease. Family members are also advised to reach out early in the disease progression, before things get to "crisis" mode.

"I've seen people just a fraction away from a nervous breakdown trying to cope with it themselves," said Kraft of the South Bay dementia support group. "Lauren just tells them, 'There is no way you can personally cope with your loved one who has memory problems. You can't get them to fit into your life anymore; you have to get into their life and find out what makes them respond and feel good."

"In doing that, you'll discover that there's more going on than most people realize."

For more information about Family Connect Care, visit familyconnectcare.com or call (310) 383-1877.

For 24-hour support or information about other local resources, contact the Alzheimer's Association's 24-hour hotline at (800) 272-3900.

Early warning signs of Alzheimer's

Here are the Alzheimer's Association's ten early warning signs and symptoms of Alzheimer's disease. If you notice any of them, please see a doctor.

- Memory loss that disrupts life
- Challenges in planning or solving problems
- Difficulty in completing familiar tasks
- Confusion with time or place
- Trouble understanding visual images and spatial relationships
- New problems with words or with speaking and writing
- Misplacing things and losing the ability to retrace steps
- Decreased or poor judgment
- Withdrawal from work or social activities
- Changes in mood or personality

Contact Lisa Jacobs lisa.jacobs@TBRnews.com or follow her on Twitter [@lisaannjacobs](https://twitter.com/lisaannjacobs).



Ron Kraft visits his wife Rosemary, an Alzheimer's patient who lives in a private specialized memory care home. (Photo by Melissa Heckscher)

Lisa Jacobs

Editor/General Manager