



Profile

The art of dementia: Program encourages creativity and connection

By Astrid Van Den Broek

At age 93, Kate had moderate dementia. Lifting her arms to paint was difficult, but she made the effort to participate in the Creative Activities Expression Program. Her drawings were plain, mainly lines of pencil, felt pen and watercolours, but the stories that accompanied the drawings said so much more. They were stories about making it through the Depression, or overcoming various difficulties in life. She also depicted simple, peaceful scenes, such as the cherry tree that grew in the courtyard of her care facility in Vancouver, and which graces the cover of this issue. Kate's family encouraged her in her artistic quest, seeing the spark it ignited. Kate joined a pottery class, taking a taxi there and back, eager not to miss any of her activities.

The spark ignited in Kate began as the motivating force behind the establishment of the Vancouver-based **Society for Arts in Dementia Care** (<http://www.cecd-society.org/>), which runs the creative expression program. "Creative expression brings people with dementia alive – they express their emotions, abilities, spirituality, culture, who they are – allowing them to live life to the fullest," says Dalia Gottlieb-Tanaka, the Society's founder. "Creative expression also helps them connect to others and feel heard and valued."

The idea for the Society came to Gottlieb-Tanaka four years ago through her work with older adults with dementia and later on as a PhD student at the University of British Columbia. Today, the Society serves as an educational resource for people working in long-term care facilities who are interested in doing creative expression activities with residents. The Society also curates exhibits of the artwork and promotes awareness around creativity and dementia through an annual conference and workshops. The idea has expanded beyond the Canadian border, with an Australian chapter of the Society opening in Perth in 2006.

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Indeed, the Society is all about expanding – expanding opportunities for people with dementia to communicate and express themselves. “In some ways, relationships are changing through dementia, so creative expression can help families find ways to reconnect,” says Dr. Rémi Quirion, scientific director at the Douglas Hospital Research Centre in Montreal. “You can see the person on a piece of paper or in music or through another creative medium.”

Hilary Lee, chair of the Australian chapter of the Society, recalls Ella*, an Italian immigrant with dementia who also showed signs of depression and withdrawal. She joined a tapestry group through which she produced a touching tapestry – a snapshot of her wedding day in Italy, dancing with her husband. Working on the tapestry, Ella would sing spontaneously and signs of her previous personality would emerge. To Ella’s family, it was a glimpse of the Ella they knew and the tapestry inspired lively discussion.

Creative expression can also offer glimpses of newly discovered life-enriching skills. “We have found that there remains a lot of capacity for the brain to reorganize itself, even in very late life,” says Quirion. “There are various ways to influence that capacity – drug treatment, nutrition, exercise, education and also art.”

In order to better develop that capacity, the Society is also contributing to the growing body of research around arts-based activity programming for people with dementia. Along with Dr. Peter Graf, a psychology professor at the University of British Columbia and a member of the Society’s advisory board, the Society and its Australian partner have developed an assessment tool to gauge the effects of participating in creative programs. The tool explores various areas in which individuals may best express themselves. “One is by means of memory. Another is spoken language – is there a change in language as a result of being involved in creative expression?” says Graf. “Body language and facial expressions are also used. Is there a change in attention?”

The ultimate goal is to help determine the best way to forge a creative connection and enhance the quality of life of people with dementia such as Kate and Ella. Another former participant, Sylvia, expressed it best: “You have given me freedom and it tastes so good.

*not her real name

For more information about the Society, visit www.cecd-society.org (<http://www.cecd-society.org/>).