

Art program engages Alzheimer patients and caregivers



Dementia programs The hands of Rena Smith, a caregiver for her husband Grant who has early dementia, work on the pages of a book sculpture as part of Gather at the Gallery, a special program for people in the early stages of dementia.

David Bebee/Record staff

KITCHENER — Tom Fitzgerald never thought of himself as artistic.

Then the Waterloo senior got a chance to try creating with a variety of art mediums in a new program for people in the early stages of dementia.

Soon the hesitation dropped and his artistic side emerged.

“I don’t know what was going to happen, but I got right into it,” Tom said.

Gather at the Gallery is a new initiative of the Alzheimer Society of Kitchener-Waterloo, inspired by a program at the MoMA in New York City. During the 10-week session, participants visit nearby museums, galleries and art studios to discuss artwork and make art themselves.

Art is really just the starting point.

“The whole project is really about relationships,” said Cara Dowhaniuk, a dementia support counsellor and program co-ordinator.

Alzheimer patients and their caregivers meet other people who understand. But it’s also a chance to simply socialize and enjoy an activity without worry about encountering negative attitudes to the progressive brain disease.

Often after a dementia diagnosis, Dowhaniuk said, people retreat into their homes and avoid activities.

“We’re trying to break that isolation,” she said.

Introducing the participants to places in the community also makes them comfortable to pursue similar activities on their own. Some people like Tom Fitzgerald are reluctant at first, then even begin to bring supplies home to do more and plan to join other classes.

“Once they got in, they’re loving it,” Dowhaniuk said.

The local Alzheimer Society chapter only recently started offering these types of enrichment programs. Until the past few years, people generally only called the society when they were in crisis and desperate for support.

Now people are being diagnosed earlier with Alzheimer’s and related dementia and are eager for programs to help them have a good life with the disease. People are realizing they can still do things and enjoy life.

“They are wanting a better quality of life,” said Debra McGonegal, development co-ordinator.

The gallery program connects Alzheimer patients with the community, giving them an outlet for expression and intellectual stimulation. The Memory Fit program started last year provides brain stimulation exercises and educational discussion for both patient and caregiver. Fading away are the old, dire notions Alzheimer’s.

“The focus here now is more preventative measures,” Dowhaniuk said. “It’s important on so many levels to be well.”

Tom and his wife Maureen Fitzgerald didn’t know anyone with Alzheimer’s until he was diagnosed. Educational sessions hosted by the society helped them better understand the disease, but the gallery program brought new opportunities.

Tom gets to create, but also a comfortable place to talk. His difficulty talking makes him nervous around people without the disease.

“I’m afraid I’m going to make a mistake,” said Tom, 72.

The couple also connected with others in the group and is going golfing with another pair — a common occurrence as the participants get to know each other and meet outside the program.

“He’s getting to meet people who are in a similar circumstance to him,” Maureen said during a recent session at the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery. “It’s so good for him.”

And they’re both enjoying the art, both talking about it and making things now displayed in their home.

“We’ve learned an awful lot through this group,” Tom said.

- By Johanna Weidner, Record staff

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