



Growing Older: Storytelling program helps those with dementia

By Sandra J. Cohen and Roger Cormier
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Last week we wrote about older people who explore experiences and avocations in the third chapter of their lives, finding success and fulfillment.

Sadly, increasing numbers of older people lose the capacity to develop a domain of new learning when they're struck by dementia. However, thanks to a new storytelling program, they can find ways to express themselves in the here and now and contribute to community in ways that entertain and help keep their spirits up.

Stagebridge Senior Theatre Community, based in Oakland and serving the greater Bay Area, is introducing a program called TimeSlips Creative Storytelling. In the program — started in Wisconsin and now offered internationally — staff and volunteers in residential, day care and other settings are trained to engage elders who have dementia in storytelling from images, words, sounds and feelings that arise spontaneously from their imaginations.

TimeSlips shifts the focus from memory and reminiscence to spontaneous, imaginative expressions that create a group story in response to, say, an engaging photograph. The process improves the morale of participants and their family caregivers, and helps facilitators to recognize the strengths of people with dementia, thus reducing their own fear of the condition.

Facilitators ask open-ended questions about a stimulating image, and intertwine verbal and other responses into a story. Sessions usually involve six-12 people with memory loss. The process works well with groups of people at all levels of cognitive ability, including late stages of dementia.

According to TimeSlips, research shows that their storytelling sessions "improve the quality and quantity of interactions between staff and residents with dementia, and improve staff attitudes toward working with people with dementia. Smaller studies tell us that TimeSlips improved communication skills among people with dementia, and attitudes toward people with dementia among family and volunteers."

John Wilson of Kensington, is energized by volunteering as a Stagebridge facilitator: "I get a great deal of satisfaction out of seeing people with Alzheimer's and dementia reconnect with themselves and the outside world, even if it's only for one hour."

Another facilitator, Sally Holzman of Martinez, adds, "I like the idea that whatever is said or happens is OK. Everything is in the present."

For more information on Stagebridge TimeSlips trainings, future training sessions, and a "TimeSlips Storytelling Kit" for family caregivers, visit www.stagebridge.org or call 510-444-4755.

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