

Creative Connections

in the Alzheimer's Disease Community

Written by Kim Kraemer

When a loved one receives an unexpected diagnosis, it can spin typical family or friend dynamics off-kilter. Fear and confusion set in. Communication suffers. Jeff Borghoff realized there was a need to correct misunderstandings within the Alzheimer's Disease Community. He met that need by bridging the communication gap between Alzheimer's patients and their caregivers.

Jeff was diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's disease in 2016 at the age of 51. After receiving his diagnosis, he became actively involved with The Alzheimer's Association as a national and regional advocate, creating awareness of the disease; specifically early onset. His role primarily consists of advocating for legislative policy at the state and national level, but his passion also takes form in the Memory Café.

Memory Café is a social and creative outlet for people living through varying stages of Alzheimer's disease. The therapeutic meet-up takes place on the second Saturday of every month from 10:30 a.m. - 12:00 p.m. at the Lacey Library* and its activities center around crafts or games with an art or music focus to help stimulate cognition. "People can be as artistic as they want with no rules, limits or lines. It gives them the ability to do something they wouldn't normally have the opportunity to do," Jeff explained. He finds joy in helping others discover the benefits of art therapy.

Cognitive exercises at Memory Café rely on nostalgia to spark memory. Favorite songs from the past evoke memories from youth. Attendance is open to patients, caregivers and other people of significance in the patient's life. There, they are given the opportunity to talk with a staff social worker for a quick check-in, and encouraged to reopen the lines of communication that may have been strained with the diagnosis.

The neurodegenerative disease affects memory, speech and behavior at varying rates of decline. Not knowing how to effectively communicate with an Alzheimer's patient, family and friends often respond by avoiding conversation. The end result is a feeling of isolation and loneliness for those who have the disease. "Because we are changing - our cognition is changing, and our ability to speak is changing, people become fearful of us. The person they knew and remember isn't the same. Rather than meet us where we are, the safer response is to not come around anymore," Jeff lamented. Memory Café introduces art as a way to think, express and reconnect with loved ones. It is important to understand that those living with



Jeff & Kim Borghoff

the diagnosis still crave socialization despite cognitive changes.

The Memory Café model is open to and encourages others to form similar groups across the state. Jeff's group provides a blueprint for success and there is no limit to the type of projects that can be offered within the group – from succulent gardens to sand art.

The Alzheimer's Association Greater New Jersey Chapter provides opportunities to learn more, including talks on effective communication and other community activities to help patients and their loved ones navigate the journey. ■

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**Disclaimer: this article was submitted pre-COVID-19. Please confirm locations and dates with Memory Café.*

What Alzheimer's Disease IS:

- **A change in cognition and speech.**
- **People with Alzheimer's may have trouble finding the right words or may lose train of thought.**
- **A time for support and compassion**
- **40% Of Alzheimer's patients also suffer from depression.**
- **A chance to reconnect and reminisce.**
- **Socialization can slow symptoms of memory decline.**

What Alzheimer's Disease IS NOT:

- **Communicable- You can't catch Alzheimer's disease by spending time with someone who has it.**
- **Uncommon- Approximately 5.8 million people in the US have some form of Alzheimer's disease.**
- **A one-size-fits-all diagnosis- There are varying stages, ages and severities of the disease.**