

Art & Alzheimer's Disease: Bringing Color to the Lives of Those Living with Memory Challenges

For most people experiencing Alzheimer's disease or related forms of dementia, communication difficulties will become a tremendous challenge. Words will become lost, trains of thought will be derailed, English will become forgotten for non-native speakers, and the words of others will become nonsensical. In addition to the communication challenges mentioned, individuals with dementia will also become unable to access many memories of their lives. For many, these changes will lead those affected to experience periods of anger and agitation, to speak less often or, in some cases, to become mute. Expression of life events and memories will become nearly impossible.

Recent research involving art and Alzheimer's disease "paints" a different picture. Practitioners of art therapy have long known that art has been used as a symbolic form of communication since the beginning of time (think of the cave drawings left by pre-historic humans). Applying this knowledge, these therapists have found that encouraging someone with dementia to paint may promote interpretive and expressive abilities, meaning that such individuals may reconnect with old memories and communicate them through their art. Art has not only been shown to provide a method of communication, it has also been demonstrated to improve concentration, reduce anxiety and assist with challenging behaviors. When encouraged to paint in groups, those involved experienced the added benefit of increased social interactions.

Realizing the many benefits of encouraging artistic expression among those living with memory challenges, our Legacy Neighborhoods and Legacy Lanes incorporate art into our resident programming. One special campus program is our annual art program called "*Living Colors*."

As the name implies, *Living Colors* offers our residents with cognitive challenges the opportunity to engage in artistic pursuits with the objective of further enriching their lives. With the help of volunteer artists, groups of residents paint specific items or suggested themes. Once the pieces are complete, the artists encourage residents with intact verbal abilities to tell a story about their completed works and, together, they develop a title for each piece created. For those unable to speak, the process of creativity is encouraged and applauded.

The art is displayed at a campus-hosted Art Walk, with members of the community invited to view the pieces our residents created. Selected pieces of art are also transformed into campus note cards that are used throughout the year.