Committed to memory

Artists for Alzheimer's aims to keep those living with dementia connected and engaged

BY LINDA MATCHAN
Memories, unlocked

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ROOKLINE — One morning last spring, about 200 senior citizens descended on the Coolidge Corner Theatre for a special program of classic old movies.

It was the first in a four-part series — the second one is today — called “Meet Me at the Coolidge...and make memories,” designed to remind the audience of the good old days of cinema. Attendees got big welcomes and free popcorn and soda. They watched clips from “Oklahoma,” “Casablanca,” and “The Wizard of Oz,” and saw legendary stars like Judy Garland, Katharine Hepburn, and Humphrey Bogart.

After each film clip, two moderators quizzed them about the movies they’d just seen, and that’s when something unexpected happened. They knew the answers — despite the fact that many in the audience were people with Alzheimer’s disease, a population generally considered to be hopelessly lost in a haze of dementia.

It didn’t seem that way in the movie theater.

“That’s Gordon MacRae,” one man shot back.

“Which movie starts out in black and white and turns into color halfway through?” asks John Zeisel, the other moderator. “Wizard of Oz?” a woman says. “When does it turn into color?” “When she lands in Oz!”

“I was amazed,” Elizabeth Taylor-Mead, associate director of the Coolidge Corner Theatre Foundation, said after the event. “It was impossible to tell who had Alzheimer’s and who was the caretaker. That blew me away.”

One person who was not amazed was Zeisel. Zeisel is the president of Woburn-based Hearthstone Alzheimer Care, which runs six residences in Massachusetts and...
New York for people with Alzheimer’s and other forms of dementia. In 2002, he also co-founded Artists for Alzheimer’s, or ARTZ, a non-profit organization that develops cultural experiences for people with the disease, including the movie program and tours of museums and galleries.

Zeisel, the son of influential industrial designer Eva Zeisel, is something of a crusader when it comes to Alzheimer’s and the arts. His eclectic background is in both sociology (he has a PhD from Columbia University), and design (he was a fellow at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design). He’s taught at Harvard, Yale, and McGill University but became interested in people with Alzheimer’s about 15 years ago when a nursing home operator in Indiana asked him for design advice. The more he immersed himself in the world of Alzheimer’s, the more he began to think that people with the disease are often misunderstood, consigned to an unstimulating daily existence and, in his words, “an increasingly meaningless life.”

ARTZ was an effort to change exactly this. The museum tour program grew out of recreational activities at the Hearthstone residence in Marlborough, said Sean Caulfield, who co-founded ARTZ. He and Zeisel, who opened his first Hearthstone facility in Massachusetts in 1992, showed residents pictures of paintings that hang in the Louvre Museum, then engaged them in discussions about art, travel, and Paris.

“The reaction we got was a real eye-opener,” Caulfield said. “There was such amazing insight into the works, and at the level of honesty and lack of inhibition I found really refreshing. The art provided a key to allowing people to express themselves in ways they would otherwise have difficulty expressing.”

The experience led ARTZ to develop guided museum tours for people living with Alzheimer’s at museums around the world including the Louvre, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra. Five museums in Massachusetts now also offer guided tours — the Fuller Craft Museum, the Harvard Museum of Natural History, the DeCordova Museum, the National Heritage Museum, and the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, which recently offered a group from Brookesville Village in Peabody a chance to see its blockbuster show, “The Emperor’s Private Paradise: Treasures From the Forbidden City.”

Now ARTZ is taking people to the movies, in a program underwritten by several Massachusetts family foundations. A pilot project they did in New York convinced them that viewing familiar film scenes can have an immediate effect on people with dementia, said Zeisel, who’s written a book on his work called “I’m Still Here: A Breakthrough Approach to Understanding Someone Living With Alzheimer’s” (Penguin/Avery, 2009). Working with focus groups of people with Alzheimer’s, they’ve identified movies, musicals, and television scenes that seem to grab their attention, he said. Among them are the iconic “I Love Lucy” candy factory conveyor belt scene, the song “If I Were a Rich Man” from “Fiddler on the Roof,” and the reunion scene at the end of “It’s a Wonderful Life.”

“They burst into song. They cried. They laughed appropriately,” said Zeisel. “They commented on the scenes in relation to their own memory, saying things like, ‘I used to have a job like that’; or ‘I never worked in a factory.’”

He said watching the film clips seemed to trigger memories of having seen the films years ago, of relaxing in the movies, of feeling good about life. And the experience wasn’t fleeting. “They remember the event for hours afterwards, if not days afterwards.”

“People think they can’t learn, but they can,” he added. “They think they can’t remember things, but they can. They think they don’t have a sense of self, but they do. They know who they are.”

Physicians caring for people with Alzheimer’s agree that the arts can be used to unlock memories from the past.

“I don’t know of any literature to prove it,” said Dr. Brandon Ally, who has done research on how music can help people with dementia at Boston University Alzheimer’s Disease Center. “But it’s a common misconception that people with Alzheimer’s can’t remember their past. That’s not true. They can remember their past just as well as I can. The parts of the brain that store long-term memory are not as affected [by the disease].”

Says Zeisel: “Art touches and engages the brain in a more profound way than other activities. My mantra is if medicine is keeping people alive longer with dementia, it’s a crime not to give them a life worth living.”

The Coolidge Corner theater crowd was definitely living it up at the ARTZ program. They sang along with “Oh What a Beautiful Morning” and “Do Re Mi,” and howled at the “I Love Lucy” episode when Lucy and Ethel wobbled down candy from the whizzing conveyer belt. “I used to love Bob Hope,” one woman remarked to the person next to her. “He was so far as I’m concerned.”

“We like to say there is no Alzheimer’s in the cinema,” said Caulfield. “What you get is the individual, their personality, their true nature, versus someone with a clinical diagnosis.”

ARTZ is working on a town-wide initiative in Brookline called “It Takes a Village” to encourage other arts-oriented businesses and organizations to offer programs or services to people with Alzheimer’s. The Coolidge’s Taylor-Mead said she hopes it becomes a model for other cities.

“When I greeted people at the theater, at least six people looked at the big staircase, smelled the popcorn being popped as they walked in and said some version of, ‘Gee, I haven’t been in a theater like this since I was a kid’,” said Taylor-Mead. “It was so touching. I thought, ‘We’re really onto something here.’”

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Beatrice O’Toole, 77 (top), answers a question posed by moderators Cameron Camp and John Zeisel (above, from left).