

HELPING HANDS

Painting new memories helps recall old

Art therapy important for people with dementia

By Emily Campbell
Examiner Staff Writer

Imagine not recognizing the house you lived in for 30 years.

Or your favorite song.

Or your own granddaughter.

That's what it's like for the residents at the Good Samaritan Nursing Center.

Art therapist Elizabeth Cockey works with residents who have dementia to help them regain memory and language skills. She teaches up to 20 residents at one time, helping them with art projects that involve drawing and painting.

"Art can be a means for [the res-

idents] to express themselves in a nonverbal way," said Cockey, who obtained her Master's degree in art therapy. "Many of these people hadn't used language to communicate for a couple of years. What happened was these art projects became a way for us to come together as a community. They began to focus and began to talk to one another, and recognize their family members. I started to realize, wow, this makes an incredible difference."

Cockey first became interested in art therapy when her mother, who suffered from genetic brain tumors, which would cause her to stroke and seizure, robbing her of verbal communication.

"I wanted to help people like my mom, I wanted to do something different," she said. "I didn't realize what a difference I could make just by showing up on a regular basis. It

VOLUNTEERING

To volunteer with Good Samaritan Hospital, call the volunteer office at 410-532-3870 or e-mail Ann.Hotts@medstar.net. Volunteers are required to make a commitment of at least three months and should have two references and give permission for a background check.

changed my life."

Good Samaritan utilizes three different forms of therapy presumed to help patients with dementia — art, music and animal. Music and animal therapies are other kinds of expressive therapies that may help folks with dementia. Patients may play with an animal that reminds them of a pet they once had, or may hear a song that was significant to them. The therapy is all about triggering past memories in order to reconnect the patient with a loved one.

Cockey says that many people mistake dementia for Alzheimer's, which is not correct in most cases. "People use 'Alzheimer's disease' as a catch-all phrase. That's not right. Most of the residents have some kind of dementia as a result of stroke or vascular dementia, MS, Parkinson's or Alzheimer's. All of those cause dementia."

"Language is what people often lose when developing more severe dementia," said Dr. Nancy Friedley, Good Samaritan Chief of Geriatric Medicine and Medical Director at Good Samaritan Nursing Center. "[The therapy] can make an incredible difference to the patient and their family. Art, music and animals will all tap into that area that they have lost and allow them sometimes to regain some skills with language."



Mattie Able Alzheimer's patient and resident of Good Samaritan Hospital Nursing Center. Art therapist Elizabeth Cockey. - Kristine Buls/Examiner

"It builds self-esteem in someone who has had everything taken from them, who has lost their home, sometimes their family, and their ability to care for themselves," Cockey said. "What's beautiful is that now we've given them something to do, a reason to be."

"Even if they aren't able to say

'I love you' with verbal communication, they might be able to show something in their artwork that expresses some of the things they can't," Dr. Friedley said.

This is the third in a series of weekly articles to run throughout the season of giving.

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Art therapy: A means to life improvement

Art therapy can be used with people of all ages, including children and adolescents, and can be helpful in treating issues like anxiety, depression, abuse, trauma, substance abuse and more. Programs involving art therapy can be found in a variety of settings including hospitals, wellness centers and educational institutions.

"A lot of people think of [the art therapy] as a diversion, like we're trying to get someone who is having a behavioral problem in the nursing home to stop, but there's

a lot more to it than that," Dr. Nancy Friedley said, adding that there is a lot of information that can be trapped inside of a person with dementia. "We have to be creative in terms of getting in touch with [that information]."

Many colleges and universities offer Master's degrees and accreditation in the area of art therapy. The American Art Therapy Association publishes extensive information about the technique, which can be found on its Web site at www.arttherapy.org. - Emily Campbell

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