ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

All are welcome to Memory Cafe

Although a growing number of people are living with Alzheimer's disease or a related disorder, dementia remains a taboo topic.

Because of shame as well as the difficulty in managing day-to-day tasks, dementia can isolate people. Wendy Betley, family services manager for the Alzheimer's Association of southeastern Wisconsin, says that "people with this disease are afraid of being judged. The thing we hear most...is that both parties, the caregiver and the one being cared for, lose their friends."

Arlington resident Beth Soltzberg, a social worker who coordinates Jewish Family & Children's Services' new Memory Café in Waltham, has heard the same thing. "People tell me that after the diagnosis, their friends disappear. And this is just when they need support the most."

Enter the Memory Café. Memory Cafés, sometimes called Alzheimer's Cafés, first appeared in Holland in 1997. Since then, they have spread throughout the UK, and to Canada and Australia. There are now about 100 cafés in the U.S. Wisconsin, where Betley works, is at the forefront with 10 cafés now in operation.

This spring, JF&CS opened the second memory café in Massachusetts. Massachusetts' other café is run by Pleasuranties adult day program in Marlborough.

What makes a Memory Café unique is that it offers a chance to get out and socialize without focusing on the disease. Staff and volunteers of the JF&CS Memory Café make a policy of not asking guests for their diagnosis, and not raising the topic of dementia unless guests do.

But every aspect of the JF&CS Memory Café from the layout, to the "conversation boxes" on the tables that can be used to prompt friendly chatting, to the creative experiences led by guest artists, is designed to promote the success and comfort of people with a range of cognitive abilities.

"Because the environment promotes success," Soltzberg says, "Dementia doesn't define or limit people at the Café. We just have fun together." In fact, Dr. Jytte Lukvig, an Alzheimer's specialist who started the first café in the U.S., says, "The best cafés are those where you can't tell who has the diagnosis and who doesn't."

The JF&CS Memory Café is co-hosted by the Waltham Student Group of Brandeis University, so guests and student volunteers can enjoy connecting across generations. Participating in the Café also gives students a deeper understanding of what life is like for people living with Alzheimer's or a related disorder, and for their care partners.

They learn both about significant challenges, and also about the resilience and enduring capacities of people with dementia. This connection seems to be as meaningful for the students as it is for the guests.

After the first Café, one of the student volunteers emailed Soltzberg that, "it was magical. Our volunteers left with the BIGGEST smiles on their faces."

Individuals and families in Arlington who are affected by Alzheimer's or a related disorder are welcome to attend the JF&CS Memory Café. The Café is open on the first Friday of the month from 10 a.m. to noon, except on major holidays.

The location is JF&CS Headquarters, 1430 Main Street in Waltham. The Café is free of charge; donations are gratefully accepted. Those requiring personal care assistance are asked to attend with a companion.

Please contact Beth Soltzberg at bsoltzberg@jfcsboston.org or 781-693-5628 for more information.