Cafés break social isolation of dementia

By Gerry Tuoti
Wicked Local Newsbank Editor

WALTHAM — Coffee, conversation and music are combining to form new social outlets for families living with Alzheimer’s disease.

“Memory cafés are part of a broader movement to make communities more inclusive of people living with dementia,” said Beth Salzberg, who runs a monthly memory café at Jewish Family & Children’s Services in Waltham.

“Everyone in the community benefits when we make the accommodations to be more inclusive.”

One a recent Friday, more than three dozen people chatted and sipped coffee in a second-floor room at Jewish Family & Children’s Services. People with dementia and their caregivers — typically family members — laughed and reminisced before a musician broke out a ukelele and led the group in a lighthearted sing-a-long.

“It’s good for the person with the illness to participate with whoever the guest of the month is,” Dover resident Helen MacDonald said. “It could be singing, artwork or theater.”

MacDonald has been bringing her husband, Tom, to the monthly memory café since it launched two years ago.

“We began coming because of the social aspect and being with other people, people who have the same problems,” she said.

For people who live with dementia, it can be comforting to connect with others who have had their own similar experiences, Salzberg said.

In addition to unstructured social time, the Waltham program always features a creative arts component designed to engage the guests and encourage interaction.

“It’s never a performance,” Salzberg said. “It’s always participatory.”

Similar scenes are repeated at 10 memory cafés across the state. Run by community organizations and nonprofits, the programs are designed to encourage social interaction and provide a respite for people with dementia, as well as their family caregivers.

Each program is a little different. Some invite guest artists. Some offer educational resources about memory loss. Others are completely unstructured.

The first memory café programs were started in the Netherlands in the late 1990s and have taken a while to catch on in the United States.

Tammy Pozerycki, owner and director of Pleasanthries Adult Day and Consulting Services in Marlborough, launched A Better Day café, the first memory café in Massachusetts, six years ago.

She expects to see the number of memory cafés continue to grow.

“I get about 15 or 20 folks each month,” she said. “It’s really just increased the socialization and removed the isolation from their lives.”

The programs also provide caregivers with a chance to informally network while socializing.

A Better Day café sometimes offers pet therapy or music therapy, but it mainly revolves around unstructured social time, Pozerycki said.

“What I see is people with smiles on their faces enjoying each other’s company,” she said.

The memory café program in Topsfield is different from other programs in many regards. The only outdoor memory café program in the state, it’s run by Mary MacDonald at her private home.

The Topsfield program is held along the wheelchair-accessible garden path at MacDonald’s home. The garden is dedicated to her mother, who died in 2008 after battling dementia.

MacDonald and her husband Carl began inviting small groups from their church to visit the garden a couple years ago. They then began inviting residents from ARC group homes.

When she heard about memory cafés earlier this year, she decided to open up her garden to a wider community.

“It resonated with me because our vision at our home in Topsfield is that we will continue to develop wheelchair accessible gardens with the vision in the future that we will become more publicly accessible,”
she said. “We’re a family that’s been impacted by Alzheimer’s and dementia.”

Her seasonal Rest Stop Ranch memory café opened earlier this year. While it’s open to members of the public living with dementia, reservations are required due to limited space.

A social component is a prominent part of the menu at all memory cafés.

“It’s a very warm atmosphere, and it’s supportive to the loved one and the caregiver,” said Newton resident Darcy Morales-Zullo, who has been bringing her father, Pedro A. Morales, to the Waltham Memory café for about a year. “I take great joy in that my dad enjoys it.”

Many older people with dementia, Salzberg said, suffer from social isolation.

For people like Morales, who is 93, memory café programs provide a rare chance to engage in a social activity.

“It’s an opportunity for my dad to be with his peers,” Morales-Zullo said. “That’s been very important since my mom passed away.”

Bette Peterson of Waltham and her caretaker, Favour Ochaki, look forward to attending memory café events.

“She has memory loss, and she loves music, and she loves getting out,” Ochaki said.

Peterson said she likes participating in activities and socializing with other guests at the café, which provides a welcoming, low-stress environment.

“I really do enjoy it,” she said. “The people have wonderful communication, and they are free and happy with it. It’s a good way to make people express themselves freely.”

Each month at the Waltham Memory café, student volunteers from nearby Brandeis University help out with the program.

“I was convinced that if it could be intergenerational, that would be a plus,” Salzberg said.

State Secretary of Elder Affairs Alice Bonner said memory cafés play an important role for both people with dementia and their family members.

“Care for the caregiver is so important,” she said. “We need to always be looking for ways to support the people on the frontlines of Alzheimer’s care. These memory cafés are an innovative way to bring respite, social opportunity and creative energy together for the benefit of caregivers and the individuals they care for.”

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John McFadden, left, and Gary Glazner lead a sing-a-long at the memory café at Jewish Family & Children’s Services in Waltham. DAILY NEWS STAFF PHOTO/GERRY TUoti