

# Café Connection

A memory café by Reva Farenback-Brateman, MSW, CDP

**F**ormer First Lady Rosalynn Carter is known for saying, “There are only four kinds of people in this world – those who have been caregivers, those who are currently caregivers, those who will be caregivers, and those who will need caregivers.”<sup>1</sup>

In the course of our work with older adults, my colleagues and I deal on a daily basis with individuals who have cognitive impairments and with the care partners who are responsible for seeing to their well-being. We often hear from care partners that they are afraid of rejection and stigma if they bring their loved one out to activities which they used to enjoy. They fear that the individual with cognitive impairment may do something embarrassing or cause a scene. So, they just stay home and become more and more socially isolated. Care partners also report that their loved one sleeps a lot, that all they do is watch television, and that they just don’t want to do anything. When they do venture out, former activities may be too demanding, resulting in anxiety, agitation, or worse.



Café Connection – a Memory Café was created by Jewish Family & Children’s Services (JFCS), the Katz Jewish Community Center (JCC) and Jewish Senior Housing and Health Care Services (JSHHS), all of whom support clients, members, and residents who are currently facing these challenges. We recognized that care partners often struggle to meet the needs of their spouse, parent or family member, while their own needs for a normal life get pushed aside. It is easy to see how their relationships can suffer. There is a need to escape, even for just a little while, and to engage in enjoyable activities together with their loved one, in an accepting and non-threatening environment.

We also discovered that creativity is a human need which grows even stronger in people living with dementia. Research shows that, “People who practice the arts as they age visit doctors less, take less medication, have higher morale, and have reduced rates of depression.”<sup>2</sup> Research is



also finding that music and art stimulate the brain in areas that Alzheimer’s Disease does not touch, bypassing the debilitating disease and often providing relief.<sup>3</sup> But research aside, engaging in the arts offers an opportunity for fun and enrichment.

Memory cafés were started in Europe in 1997 and have spread across the United States, with over 200 programs now in this country. While they employ different formats and are held in different settings, they all provide a much-needed break from the “to-do” list, and create a place to have fun together without focusing on the disease.

The idea of Café Connection is simple: “leave the disease at the door” and come out and have a good time together. The program is free and no diagnosis is required to attend. We ask for reservations, and participants with memory challenges must attend with a care partner, most of whom have been spouses, but we have adult children, siblings, friends and paid care givers. We even have children attend with grandparents, adding an intergenerational component.

Café Connection is held on the second Thursday of each month from 10 AM to 12 Noon, in a space in the JCC. Participants are greeted by one of our eight volunteers assigned to each event, along with staff from our three agencies. Volunteers (29 in total) undergo a two-hour training and are instructed to treat participants as if they were guests at a party in their home – providing a warm welcome, taking their coats, making small talk, helping them get refreshments, and get situated at a table. The first half hour is devoted to socializing. Since our first Café was held in October 2016, we have averaged 35 to 40 participants, and we have a core group who attend every month. Participants look forward to seeing one another, saving seats and reporting if someone isn’t coming because they are sick or on vacation. Care partners and individuals with memory challenges alike look forward to seeing the friends they have made at Café Connection. While as anticipated, most participants with memory challenges are over 60, we do have some individuals who are in their 50’s and others who are in their 90’s, with the majority in their late 70’s and 80’s.

The program unfolds in this way: Following coffee and conversation, an hour is devoted to an interactive creative arts experience, which have included singing familiar songs and even writing new lyrics to one, playing instruments (no talent required), flower arranging, dance, exercise to music, pottery making, painting, decorating picture frames and even a visit by the cutest therapy dogs! The last half hour leaves time for another cup of coffee, a visit to the resource



table, and completing a brief evaluation. About half of the participants stay for lunch (\$2.50/person), as the JCC is a Federally-sponsored congregate meal site. Any participant who wishes to, may also attend a free Movement and Motivation class after lunch.

A memory café is not a workshop, seminar or lecture about dementia. It is not a facilitated support group, nor a drop-off respite program. All of these are available in the community, and staff can direct those interested to the appropriate resource.

To understand the impact, listen to what our participants had to say about Café Connection: “Today’s program was superb! Laughing and exercising is great for my husband and me! Thank you!”, “I enjoy coming here and meeting new friends – whatever we are doing is very exciting.” “As a caregiver I look forward to each Café Connection. It gives us an opportunity to be with others living similar to our situation. My wife lights up to be able to mingle with people who are not condescending to her illness and encourage her to be herself. I enjoy the comradery of like minded people in a relaxed gathering just enjoying the time together.” Each month the staff remark to one another how Café Connection has been one of the highlights of our careers. How can it not be, when, as one participant put it, “the smiles continue throughout the program and happiness spills into the hallways as we leave.”

For more information about Café Connection, please contact Reva Farenback-Brateman, Project Director at (856) 424-1333, ext. 1184 or [rfbrateman@jfedsnj.org](mailto:rfbrateman@jfedsnj.org)

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1 – The Rosalynn Carter Institute for Caregiving, <http://rosalynncarter.org/>

2 – Artful Aging – [www.compas.org/artful-aging](http://www.compas.org/artful-aging)

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