‘Magical’ Memory Cafes boost people with mental challenges

Memory Cafes, offered in Sonoma on alternate Mondays by the CarePartners Initiative, include a variety of engaging activities for people with mental challenges as well as their caregivers and friends.

Facing the group at a Memory Cafe in Sonoma are from left, Marybeth Biaggi, puppy raiser for Canine Companions in Santa Rosa with Rhett, a 16-month-old service dog; facilitator Heidi Lage; and assistant facilitator Kris Sharp. On the table is a farewell card signed by group members thanking Rhett for his many entertaining visits. Rhett will be entering Canine Companion training in early August. Memory Cafes, which are offered at Sonoma United Methodist Church on Patten Street on alternate Mondays throughout the year, are social gatherings for people affected by memory challenges as well as their caregivers and friends. Photo taken on Monday, July 22, 2024. (Robbi Pengelly/Index-Tribune)

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As her painting blossomed into a full-color work, the artist marveled at the sudden transformation.

The artist, who has dementia, chatted throughout the creative process.

“Her care partner proclaimed that she talked more while working on her 30-minute painting than she had done in the last week,” said Whitney Evans, chair of the CarePartners Initiative Board of Directors. “Now, that is magic.”

The painting was done during a Memory Cafe, a social gathering for people affected by memory challenges as well as their caregivers and friends. The cafe, an offering of the CarePartners Initiative, takes place from 10 a.m. to noon on the second and fourth Monday of every month at Sonoma United Methodist Church.

Participants engage in a variety of activities, including crafts, singing, games, flower arranging, chair yoga, dancing, visits from comfort animals, show and tell, poetry and history presentations.

Evans said it is no exaggeration to say that the cafes are magical for those with memory challenges and their caregivers.

A labor of love

Heidi Lage — a licensed marriage and family therapist with a private practice in Sonoma and a member of the CarePartners Initiative’s board — was a caregiver for her mother, who had dementia and died on Aug. 20, 2023, at the age of 75. Lage was instrumental in designing the CarePartners Initiative’s Memory Cafes and getting them up and running in November 2023.

“Being a part of the CarePartners Initiative and starting Memory Cafes has been a beautiful and useful way to channel my grief and honor my mom,” she said. “At every Memory Café, I feel my mom’s encouragement and know she is proud of what I have created for others who have dementia. All my time is donated, and I give as a volunteer.”

Designing the Memory Cafes required plenty of work.

“I read many books and research articles and consulted with individuals and organizations that have been conducting Memory Cafes for years,” she said.

She said that even small details were critical in planning the cafes.

“Even choosing the days and times was essential to our success,” Lage said. “I chose the second and fourth Monday of every month instead of the first Monday as I am aware that many elderly individuals still rely on paper flip-the-month calendars. I didn’t want some to miss a Memory Café because they hadn’t flipped to the new month yet.”

“For caregivers who endure isolation in their communities, the cafes provide socialization with other caregivers who share their ’36-hour day’ existence,” he said. “Companionship among caregivers during cafes leads to companionship for other community activities. We are delighted when we learn that two caregivers and their loved ones went out to dinner together.”

Heidi Lage — a licensed marriage and family therapist with a private practice in Sonoma and a member of the CarePartners Initiative’s board — said that 20 to 24 people now attend the Memory Cafes.

“We are absolutely growing,” she said. “Our first few cafes had about eight to 10 individuals, but they have steadily grown ever since. There is clearly a need for them.”

She said the cafes offer opportunities for those with memory loss and their caregiver to join a community where they are welcomed.

Lage strategically chose to offer the cafes from 10 a.m. to noon to provide simple coffee, tea and snacks instead of a full meal.

“In addition, most individuals with dementia are more alert in the morning and may experience ‘sundowners’ in the afternoon,” she said. “Also, many caregivers are too exhausted by the end of the day to get out of the house.”

She said that many participants have shared that the joy they experience during the mornings at the Memory Cafes often lasts until the end of the day, making them some of their best days.

Lage was honored for her work with CarePartners Initiative at the Star Volunteer Awards event, hosted by Sonoma Valley Catalyst Fund on April 28, 2024.

The event, which is co-sponsored by Community Foundation Sonoma County, Rotary Club of Sonoma Valley and CarePartners Initiative, honored volunteers who have made an ongoing, significant contribution to the nonprofit organizations they serve and Sonoma Valley in 2023.

“They also are surrounded by others who truly understand what their journey is like,” Lage said. “It is a special time to enjoy fun activities, listen to music and catch up with friends. It also provides a break in the monotony of caregiving. It allows for a positive and fun activity for both caregiver and care receiver to enjoy one another and others.”

Most importantly, she said, it reduces stigma and isolation surrounding dementia.

“Just because someone has dementia, it doesn’t mean that it isn’t meaningful for them to go out, enjoy some good food and laugh with friends to have a sense of purpose and be an active member of the community.”

Lage drew from her educational background and therapeutic expertise to design the Memory Cafes for CarePartners Initiative.

She included art and music therapy because extensive research has shown that it benefits people with dementia.

“There is evidence that creating art improves cognition and can improve mood for those with dementia,” Lage said. “Different areas of the brain are activated, and new pathways can continue to be made.

“Music seems to be the universal language, even for those whose speech has been affected by memory loss. I have personally witnessed individuals with language loss who sing along to the music from their era.”

Lage said that arts and crafts are important because they require the use of fine motor skills and creativity. They also provide an activity for attendees while engaging in conversation to “break the ice” with others.

“I have found that a very important part of our cafes is when we ask the question of the day,” she said. “It is typically pretty simple, like ‘What is your favorite candy?’ ‘Tell me about your favorite pet,’ or ‘Tell me about your favorite holiday.’ Just like the rest of society, those with memory loss want to share their stories and be validated.”

Their favorite game is dementia-friendly bingo.

“It is fun and engaging, and participants get very excited to yell, ‘Bingo!’ and pick a prize,” Lage said.

Pianists, guitarists and singers provide musical entertainment. Simple shakers and tambourines are provided to attendees, and everyone sings and joins in, Lage said, adding that the most popular songs are patriotic, from the '50s and '60s and classics, such as "You Are My Sunshine."

Also, a volunteer, Marybeth Biaggi, and her service dog, Rhett, come to almost every Memory Café.

"The participants love Rhett, and he brings a sense of comfort to many," Lage said. "One participant shared that she feels the presence of a dog may open the door to someone who is reticent to join or participate in Memory Café."

Attendees also enjoy physical activities.

"The importance of the exercises are twofold," Lage said. "They stimulate the blood flow in a healthy way, and they are fun. We often play really engaging high-energy music — Elvis is a favorite — and guide the participants in chair movements.

"Our most popular movement activity is to give participants pool noodles and then toss a bunch of balloons in the air. They try to keep them up. It is a hoot, with lots of smiles and laughter!"

Participants also are given volunteer opportunities during the Memory Cafes.

"We decorated brown bags, with encouraging messages, that contained socks, water and snacks to be distributed to the unhoused," Lage said. "It is incredibly important for those with memory loss to still feel they are contributing members of society.

"For some of our participants that are further progressed in their dementia journey, we provide mismatched socks to assemble and tea towels to fold. They *want* to be useful and contribute."

Everyone in the Sonoma Valley community who has memory loss and their caregiver — or friend or loved one — is invited to attend the Memory Cafes.

"We do not require a diagnosis nor ask to see any proof of memory loss," Lage said. "We focus on the person, not the disease."

No reservations or RSVPs are required, either.

“We understand that it can be difficult to plan in advance when you are caring for someone with memory loss, and we don’t want people to feel obligated or bad if they are unable to attend at the last minute or come late,” Lage said. “On the flip side, we need to be prepared for a small or large number of participants at every Memory Café.”

Decaffeinated and regular coffee, tea, as well as doughnuts, muffins of cookies are served at each gathering. Occasionally, special treats are available, such as when an activity involves decorating cupcakes or making banana split sundaes.

For more information, access carepartnersinitiative.org or call 707-732-9436.

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