ENGAGED THROUGH THE ARTS

Online programs help those with dementia keep their minds active while staying home

BY KAY BLOUGH
Special to Newsday

The power of art to unite and soothe is getting a workout in an online program from the Long Island Museum aimed at helping those with Alzheimer's disease or dementia and their caregivers fill their days and exercise their minds.

Music is part of the equation, with streaming of concerts designed to engage and stimulate by performers experienced in working with those with memory loss. From virtual chat sessions to singalongs, chair exercise programs and telephone support groups for care partners, agencies are reaching out to help caregivers who no longer have access to day programs or respite care — but are still tasked with 24/7 caring for their loved one with dementia or Alzheimer's disease.

"It's very hard for our families," said Lori Maldavi, director of program development at Bay Haven Adult Day Services, which pre-pandemic has offered daytime care, therapeutic activities and supervision at sites in Port Jefferson, Riverhead and Ronkonkoma. "We're reaching out in a number of ways, and doing Facebook Live programming so families can create some sort of routine and a schedule. We try to create a

See VIRTUAL CARE on E20
Staying mentally engaged

VIRTUAL CARE from E19

A variety of therapeutic activities on Facebook.

An estimated 5.3 million Americans age 65 and older are living with Alzheimer’s disease, according to statistics from the Alzheimer’s Association, an advocacy and support organization. Ninety percent are 75 or older. One in 10 people age 65 and older (9%) has Alzheimer’s. Alzheimer’s disease makes up 60% to 70% of dementia cases, according to the World Health Organization.

Day Haven offers four Facebook Live programs on weekdays so caregivers can plan around them. Staff also offers support groups via phone or Zoom sessions. “Caregivers really need that support,” Maladri said. “We’re all experiencing that isolation, but when you’re home caring for someone with dementia, it’s magnified. Their need is exacerbated by the isolation.”

STAYING ENGAGED

Long Island Museum’s “In the Moment: Art Engagement for People with Memory Loss” is part of the museum’s outreach efforts in what Beth Ciarelli called this “new normal,” while its doors are shuttered because of social-distancing restrictions to slow the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

The museum, online at longislandmuseum.org, lists new episodes on its website and emails previously registered memory-program visitors a series of paintings and directed questions that offer a springboard for discussion similar to one of its guided gallery tours. There are no right or wrong answers when discussing the paintings, noted Ciarelli, assistant education director, just an opportunity for participants to engage creatively together.

Sandra Gallo, 72, of Massapequa, used the emailed questions to help her husband, Irwin, 74, during a review of the paintings. Both retired in 2015. They enjoyed discussing the images while celebrating their 52nd wedding anniversary.

“I tried to start a little conversation,” Sandra said. “We were deciding what season it was in the painting of a boy sitting under a tree, what he was doing — was he reading, or eating, or maybe he was fishing? We weren’t sure, but we enjoyed talking about it.” The untitled landscape by Whitney Hubbard showed a fall scene with a boy sitting under a large tree.

Another painting of a hillside scene by Charles Lenox Wright Ill from 1957 showed a hillside covered with white, fuzzy plants. “We spent time discussing what kind of plant it was, maybe the ones where you pick up the top and blow on it and make a wish as the seeds scatter,” Sandra said.

Question prompts from the LIM included: what colors do you notice, what season do you think it is and how can you tell and why, and if you stepped into this painting, what would you hear, smell or what could you touch?

Sandra searches for activities that will engage Irwin’s interest while they’re pretty much confined at home because of social-distancing rules to prevent spreading the virus.

She looks forward to more art-related offerings from LIM. “I don’t want any decline. We’ve been working so hard on things that provide mental stimulation. We do FaceTime with the children, and my son in Smithtown used to come help, but we’ve lost our family support as well.”

Viewing streamed concerts also helps, Sandra said, as Irwin enjoys music as do many with Alzheimer’s disease. They’ve watched musician Steve Cassano’s concert, offered through the Making Memories Through the Arts program, shows that are meant to engage and stimulate those with memory loss. “He really gets into it. It’s the next best thing,” Sandra said. “I could see that he was enjoying it. I’m very thankful for anything we can get virtually. It breaks up the day a bit, otherwise it’s really challenging.”

Marcy Rhodes, a social worker who runs Making Memories With Music as part of her overall Making Memories Through the Arts programming at the LIM and several other arts centers, is offering on her website streamed concerts by professional musicians who work frequently with the memory-loss community. “The organizations that provide services have really ramped up,” Rhodes said. “Once we all realized we were going to be home, the programs developed in a more organized way.”

Cassano said he’s gotten emails with positive feedback. “Thank you for a bit of normalcy during this time,” read one letter, he said, and another viewer sent him a clip of her mother dancing in her chair along with the music. He also streams Live Memory Cafes that make participants feel like there’s face-to-face contact. “It started as a conversation of what can we do. I have a studio at home, so it was a natural extension,” he said.

VIRTUAL ART

For Maureen Matthews, 88, of Cold Spring Harbor, and her daughter Theresa Matthews, 64, of Huntington, a retired teacher, the paintings from LIM sparked a discussion of colors, seasons and whether a painting by William of Leftwich Dodge titled “Stony Brook Harbor” reminded Maureen of a similar view in uptown Lake George, where she had visited.

Maureen’s initial replies were one-word answers, Theresa said, but she mentioned a few details and continued to discuss the colors and the painting’s setting. For the snowy setting in Ernest Lawson’s 1909 painting titled “Winter Scene,” she said that anyone who has dementia noted it had “few leaves” and that it was “a walk around outside it’s cold.”

“When I have her attention she is able to give me some details,” Theresa said. But then Maureen tired and lost focus, Theresa said, so they talked about the fourth painting the next day.

She’s been trying to keep Maureen’s wake-up and bedtime schedules the same, with dinner followed by watching a round of “Jeopardy!” and a later bedtime, but they’re still many hours left in the day if it’s nice and they go to the garden and she’s loving that,” Theresa said. And Maureen listens to music on her Ipad Shuffle while Theresa gardens. “If we go for a long car ride she gets agitated, she has her music.” Theresa said her mother also
CONVERSATION STARTERS: As part of its “In the Moment: Art Engagement for People with Memory Loss,” the Long Island Museum shares images of artworks to be used as dialogue prompts for those with dementia and their caregivers. Clockwise, from top left, Ernest Lawson’s “Winter Scene;” an untitled oil painting by Whitney Hubbard; Charles Lenox Wright Jr.’s “Plum Blossom Fire Island Beach;” and William de Leftwich Dodge’s “Stony Creek Harbor.”

enjoys watching streaming
Making Memories concerts,
which they had frequently
attended in person at the
Cinema Arts Centre in Hunt-
ington and the Gold Coast
Arts Center in Glen Cove.
The virtual assistance is
welcome, Theresa said. The
pair previously attended en-
richment programs during the
week, and a volunteer helped
for a few hours. “I don’t have
my respite time now,” Theresa
said, although her husband,
Ted Donner, also assists in
caring for Maureen.

REACHING OUT
Creating connections and
community fueled the idea to
bring the museum’s “In the
Moment” gallery tours on-
line. Guided discussion helps
foster connections while the
open-ended questions spark
discussion and memories.
Part of the success of the
in-house gallery tours is the
experience for both the care
partner and the participant of
seeing the paintings in the
museum setting. “The curator
guides sparks discussion and
moves people away from
[reliance on the caregiver],”
Chiarelli said. “It gives them
a chance to view the exhibit
together as a normal social
gathering.”

To jump-start dialogue at
home, Chiarelli suggests
removing distractions and
using a touch object that
encourages memories. If
there’s a couch in a painting,
the caregiver could give the
participant a piece of velvet
to feel, she said, or if there’s a
flower, they can offer a scent
on a cotton ball to awaken
their sense of smell. If there’s
a beach, offer a shell, pebble
or some sand to touch.

“The sensory experience
helps spark conversation and
memories,” Chiarelli said.
“You often hear incredible
stories of people’s child-
hoods. That’s our goal, to
create the spark for a mean-
ingful conversation.”

Tori Cohen, executive
director of the Long Island
Alzheimer’s and Dementia
Center, said her organization
has pivoted quickly and has
started doing virtual activi-
ties via Facebook to help
caregivers and participants,
from exercise and singing
sessions to chat and brain
games, often on a regular
schedule six days a week.

“It’s a whole new world. We
were using social media to
make people aware of our
services, now we’re using it
to offer services,” Cohen said.

“This might be something
that will be a part of our
future.”

Bob Marks, executive
director of the Alzheimer’s
Disease Resource Center in
Bay Shore, concurred. “Imag-
ine if we had to go through
this without online support,”
Marks said. “It’s going to be
long way to keep us all
connected. I think needs are
increasing. The novelty has
worn off.”

Online resources
Agencies serving those diag-
nosed with Alzheimer’s disease
and dementia offer online daily
activity classes and chat sessions,
often guided by a familiar face,
so participants can join in and
add structure to their day. Here’s
a sampling, ranging from virtual
support sessions for caregivers
to live Facebook events and
instructional webinars.

Alzheimer’s Disease Resource
Center (ADRCInc.org): The
Alzheimer’s disease Resource
Center provides programs and
services for people with
Alzheimer’s disease and for
families, direct-care profession-
als and health care professionals.
It serves the metropolitan area.
Its main office is in Bay Shore
and it has satellite offices open
by appointment in Garden City,
Lake Success and Southampton.
Check its Facebook page (face-
book.com/ADRCInc) for such
live activities as bingo and
music, and links to telephone
support groups. On its home-
page, a link in the ARDC An-
nouncements box goes to a page
with a caregiver log, tips for
relaxation techniques and more.
It also is offering a three-part
webinar series, “Keeping It
Together While Staying Apart,”
May sponsored by The Bristal.
Call 631-890-8800, ext. 304.

Alzheimer’s Foundation of America (alzfdn.org): This national organization provides support, services and education to individ-
uals, families and caregivers
affected by Alzheimer’s disease
and related dementias. It offers
information, caregiver res-
ources and professional train-
ing. Its events calendar lists
webinars and programming,
including community classes on
topics from brain-improving
painting and fitness to an Irish
step dance performance and
self-care techniques for care-
givers, as well as webinars with
tips for how caregivers can
maintain quality of life and have
successful activity interactions.
Its helpline, 866-296-8484, is
open seven days a week (9 a.m.
to 9 p.m. Monday to Friday, and
9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday and
Sunday). Its Facebook page
(alzheimersfoundation
onfacebook) offers weekly
activity tips, notices of events
and virtual classes.

Day Haven Adult Day Services (dayhaven.org/index.html):
Day Haven runs adult day ser-
vice programs at three loca-
 tions in Suffolk County — Port
Jefferson, Ronkonkoma and
Riverhead — and has moved
different programs online.
Support groups are online for
now. Those interested in partici-
 pating may contact Lori Mal-
day or (email lmalday@pcplong-
 island.com) or phone 631-885-
2000, ext. 803. Check its Face-
book page (facebook.com/
Dayhaven) for live staff-led
events, such as exercise ses-
 sions, chats and brain teasers.

Long Island Alzheimer’s and Dement-
ia Center (lidementia.org): Form-
 erly the Long Island Alzheimer’s Foundation, the organization changed its name in
October 2019 to more accurately
reflect that it serves those with
Alzheimer’s disease as well as
those with dementia. It offers
live interactive programs three
times a day — 10:30 a.m., 12:00
and 2 p.m., except Sunday — on
its Facebook page (facebook.
com/LongIslandAlzheimer’s-
DementiaCenter) along with
virtual Memory Cafés and tele-
phone support groups led by a
licensed social worker.

To help build a support net-
work for caregivers of those in
the early stages of Alzheimer’s
disease, there’s a weekly virtual
meets online through Wednes-
days from June 30. LIAD also is offering
Zoom as a free online tool.

Making Memories Through the Arts (Makingmemories
throughhearts.com): Al-
though in-person programs are
canceled while gatherings are
prohibited, organizer Marcia Klaes
has performances posted on her
website. The videos allow partic-
ipants to sing and clap along as
the performers introduce the
songs and actions.

Available now on the “Music
section of the site are perfor-
mances from singer and gui-
тарist Steve Cassano and
Robert Fabiano, a singer-song-
writer and lead singer with the
Peter Duchin Orchestra. Upcom-
ing performances from folk-
rocker Stuart Markus with
Gathering Time and singer-
 songwriter-pianist Gail Storm
are scheduled to be added in
two-week intervals.

There’s also a Facebook page,
facebook.com/makings
memoriesthroughhearts,
that lists events.