

HEALTHY LIVING

Caregivers get help

Coping with Alzheimer's 'a heavy load'

BY MARY ANN ROSER
Cox News Service

Debra Schultz is like a lot of stressed family members who care for a loved one with Alzheimer's disease. She knew she couldn't keep it up without also caring for herself.

In the four years since her husband, Bob, was diagnosed at age 56, the Cedar Park, Texas, woman has found churches that offer free activities for Alzheimer's patients and give caregivers a much-needed break. She also gets an emotional outlet and empathy from support groups and volunteers.

"The way I get by day to day is I keep in contact with people like this," said Schultz, 49, motioning to the women hovering over her husband at One Way Baptist Church in Round

Rock, Texas, where Bob Schultz attends the Alzheimer's Respite Program on Wednesdays. He goes to another church program on Tuesdays.

As the nation's population ages and millions of baby boomers approach retirement age, the plight of Alzheimer's caregivers is getting increased attention. In Central Texas, a new program in which teams of volunteers assist caregivers — whether it's dropping off a meal or taking the caregiver to a movie — was launched in Bell County in January and in Travis County a few months ago.

"There has been this growing attention (to caregivers), but there is a new level of urgency," said Alan Stevens, a professor in the Department of Medicine at Scott & White Memorial Hospital in Temple, Texas, who also holds an endowed chair in gerontology. "Our



KELLY WEST/COX NEWS SERVICE

Support groups and adult day-care programs help Debra Schultz care for her husband, Bob, who has Alzheimer's.

Arts therapy helps memory-loss patients

BY D. AILEEN DODD
Cox News Service

The jumbled memories of faces and places long forgotten seem to grow clearer with each brush stroke on canvas.

For people suffering with Alzheimer's disease, exposure to art can unlock the mind.

A new nonprofit group is working to trigger the memories of Alzheimer's patients in Gwinnett County, Ga., and elsewhere with art. Organ-izers of "Art Without Boundaries" use volunteers to bring a form of art and physical therapy to seniors suffering with memory loss.

The therapy, called MnemeTherapy, combines song, movement, art and positive reinforcement to stimulate the brain, even damaged areas.

"We get both sides of the brain synchronized," said Noell Hammer, Florida-based founder of the therapy, who has tested it on thousands of patients. "The other side of the brain can pick up the slack. ... We have seen some dramatic changes."

Patients who have tried the therapy, Hammer said, have mood changes and temporarily regain some of the language they had lost, or recognize family again for a time.

Some doctors say that art exposure can temporarily reverse the anxiety, aggression, agitation and apathy found in some Alzheimer's patients. "This is a very dark disease. There is no remission; it's just downhill," Hammer said.

Tia Severino, an amateur painter, is organizer of the Georgia group of Art Without Boundaries program and is working with her



The Pecan Grove by Charles (Riverside Living Center, Piedmont, SC)

daughter, Kate Johnson, a high school senior, to launch the endeavor. Both are believers that art can be an important source of therapy for seniors.

Art Without Boundaries, a foundation launched in South Florida about seven years ago, has apprentice groups in 10 states working on campaigns to help seniors suffering from memory loss. The therapy has been used on patients in nursing homes, private care facilities and senior centers. The patients learn to dance and paint with the help of a therapist.

"The act of creating, the movement involved, the brush stroke, the colors, the communication that is going on between the therapist and the patient has meaning to them," Severino said. "A picture from their past comes to life right before their eyes." ■

• **ONLINE:** Art Without Boundaries, www.artwithoutboundaries.org.

system can't handle the tsunami of patients that are coming."

More than 5 million Americans have Alzheimer's disease, and a new diagnosis is made every 72 seconds, according to the Alzheimer's Association.

Almost 10 million Americans are caring for someone with Alzheimer's or another type of dementia at home, the association says.

Scott & White was one of five locations to receive a national grant to research ways to aid caregivers. Stevens worked with hospital nurses and the Area Agency on Aging in Temple to launch a program called Resources for Enhancing Alzheimer's Caregiver Health, or REACH II, which has been duplicated in Travis County. Teams of volunteers find out what the caregiver needs and then help provide it.

The program is free to caregivers of Alzheimer's and dementia patients. In about a year, Scott & White wants to expand the program to its campus in Round Rock, Texas.

Adult day-care programs are a long-standing option that also help caregivers keep their loved ones home. They know their family member is safe and is being stimulated mentally, whether by doing crafts, exercises or singing — all activities that Bob, who was an environmental engineer, took part in recently at the Baptist church program.

He enjoyed the singing, he said, but turned his thumb down on the crafts. He'd rather be bowling.

Emily McBurney's husband went into a nursing home with Alzheimer's, but her mother, who is 85, also has Alzheimer's and is being cared for at home by McBurney's 85-year-old father in Temple. McBurney, 59, who also lives in Temple, goes back and forth between the nursing home and her parent's home every day to help care for her husband and mother.

She's now getting help from a care team of REACH II volunteers.

"One girl came and swept my patio. Another came and balanced my checkbook," McBurney said. "I would feel very lonely if it weren't for this care group being around to check on me."

The trained teams understand the frustrations, guilt and grief of watching a loved one fade away, she said.

"Between 50 (percent) and 60 percent of caregivers experience clinical depression," said Bonnie Lawrence, a spokeswoman for Family Caregiver Alliance, a national education, research and advocacy group in San Francisco. "It's a combination of stress, exhaustion, sometimes guilt, frustration and anger. It's a heavy load."

The care teams "give me the validation I need to take care of myself," said McBurney, whose husband, a former Baylor University professor, is 72. "They're an answer to a prayer."

Not all caregivers seek help, though, particularly the elderly. They often wait the longest before seeking help, even though bathing, dressing and handling a sometimes resistant loved one is physically hardest on them, said Kathleen Coggin, program director for in-home care and respite services with Family Eldercare.

"They fear if they reach out, their spouse will be placed in a facility, and they will be separated," Coggin said.

With just five REACH II teams in place so far in Travis County, the program is only matching teams to elderly caregivers now, said Debbie Hanna, president of the Alzheimer's Association Capital of Texas Chapter.

Debra Schultz said she requested help from REACH II but was turned down because she's not elderly. But Schultz said she'll keep asking.

"I just heard too much good stuff about" the program," she said. ■

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