

# Artists for Alzheimer's

An exciting new project linking art and health care is taking root in New York City, and is likely to reach much further geographically in the future. Artists for Alzheimer's, an initiative of the Hearthstone Alzheimer's Family Foundation, is located virtually at [ArtistsForAlzheimers.org](http://ArtistsForAlzheimers.org). Performances are currently being presented at an Alzheimer's Assisted Living Treatment Residence on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, as well as in various locations in White Plains and Massachusetts. The initiative invites artists - including musicians, painters, writers, sculptors, actors, comedians, and even chefs and others who are creative in unique ways - to donate one hour a year of their time and creativity, spending that hour with people with Alzheimer's disease. The purpose: to make a personal connection, to touch someone deeply, to realize that people with Alzheimer's are just people, and to reduce the unfounded stigma that presently labels people with Alzheimer's as having nothing more to contribute in life. Artists for Alzheimer's has taken off - it is reaching what author Malcolm Gladwell calls a "tipping point."

The brainchild of Sean Caulfield, a Massachusetts Alzheimer's advocate, Artists for Alzheimer's is rapidly attracting more and more attention and performers. "Art has the ability to transcend the limitations of conventional communication and language," said Caulfield, "leading to rich emotional connections and, in many cases, enabling people with Alzheimer's to break out of their shells, to become awakened, if you will."

Alzheimer's is an illness that affects people's brains - but only to a certain degree and only in certain ways. These effects leave open an opportunity that permits artists to communicate exceptionally well with this group. The human brain has over 100 billion neurons. Through the 12 to 15-year course of the disease, tens of billions of neurons are affected, many of them in the brain's hippocampus and frontal lobe. These neuronal losses are associated with certain functional losses. While the symptoms differ between individuals, there are some general patterns. The ability to remember very recent events is lost, as is (in most cases) the ability to plan a complex task, like cooking a meal or balancing a checkbook. The ability to express complex thoughts in spoken language is often affected, along with the ability to control one's expressions and feelings. Even in severe cases, 70 or 80 billion neurons remain in tact, especially in the amygdala, which is the brain's emotional

center. This means that the person with Alzheimer's retains many skills and abilities. These are skills that have been learned over a lifetime: the ability to feel emotions and enjoy things; the ability to laugh and have a sense of humor. The ability to see interesting things and even interpret them. The ability to express emotions, feelings and moods. These remaining abilities of the brain can often support a person's creative intuitions and drives. Thus art and creativity are particularly appropriate forms of expression for people who have Alzheimer's.



Since its beginnings four months ago, the initiative has recruited over twenty artists to perform or to organize a hands-on event with a group of people who have Alzheimer's. Tanya Azarani, a painter and recent Fordham University graduate studying for her pre-med exams, has brought in canvases and paints to elicit the creative

energies of residents on three occasions. The results are striking: flowers, animals, houses, and even a putting green. Tanya is now planning a series of painting sessions that will focus on helping residents to reach and express their unique internal images.

Actor Evan Bass, wearing his grandfather's wool hat, brought people's lost memories to life with presentations and a discussion of old-time radio broadcasts such as *The Lone Ranger* and *The Shadow*. Comedian Ethan Geto, in the guise of his comic alter ego Aaron Florsheimer, staged a hysterically funny comedy routine based on his experiences as a child actor under the tutelage of his stand-up comic father in the "Borscht Belt" resorts of the Catskills and Berkshires in the late 1940's. Geto engaged the audience in interactive quiz shows and guessing games. Do any of you remember the Buster Brown shoe ad that ends in "Arf! Arf! That's my dog Tye. He lives there too?" A lot of people did.



Actress and author Jeanne Richards read from her latest books: *The First Olympic Games*, *A Gruesome Tale With A Happy Ending* and *God's Gift*, a retelling of the Adam and Eve story and a Book-Of-The-Month Main Selection. Frank, one of the participants, pointed out to Jeanne that the books seem to have been written for children. Jeanne explained that while this was true they also held universal truths. To Jeanne's delight, Frank chimed in: "You could just have said that we're all young at heart!"

When asked why they personally decided to take part in the Artists for Alzheimer's program, some artists said they have a grandparent or older friend who has or had Alzheimer's and that their participation is a way of paying homage. Lev Mendes, a student at Marsha Stem Talmudic Academy in New York City, called the program a vehicle for combining his love of art and his love of seeing the creativity of elders awaken. Some have mentioned the "convenience" of the initiative: "It's only one hour of my time; that's not much to ask." In fact the minimal time requirement is fundamental to the program's objective. The secret to overcoming the stigma associated with a disease lies in the number of people who are willing to act, not the amount of time they spend. Every artist in the program so far has been seduced by the openness of the audience and their willingness to participate; each artist has asked "When can I come back?"

The program interprets the term "artist" as generously as possible. Painters, musicians, actors, comedians, photographers and authors have already participated. Artists for Alzheimer's actively seeks people with other "artistic" and creative skills - a chef who might cook dessert pastries, a story teller, a gardener, a flower arranger. Beginners are as welcome as experienced professionals. Evan Bass is a recent Columbia graduate and a student at the Ward Acting Studio. Chris Lynch is a professional commercial photographer with a studio in SoHo. Eight-year-old piano prodigy Mackenzie Melemed has performed on nationally televised shows. Violinist Paul Robertson is leader of the world-renowned Medici quartet.

The Artists for Alzheimer's website offers an easy way to volunteer. In exchange for an hour of creativity, participants receive "top billing" on the site with a photograph, a short bio, and a link to their own personal or professional sites. The web-site is also a resource that can be mined for hints in planning a successful presentation, and photos and quotes from previous performances.

There are at present nearly 5 million people with Alzheimer's disease in the United States alone. Alzheimer's disease strikes nearly half of those who live beyond the age of 85. Moreover, art is a great equalizer. If you present a math problem to people living with Alzheimer's and to other elders, you will see vast differences. But if you give both groups a paintbrush or a song to sing, you will see how similar they are. It is inspiring to think that if every artist whose life (through family or friends) has been touched by Alzheimer's were to volunteer

for just one hour a year, little would remain of the stigma and the isolation that the disease carries with it today. With that much creativity and compassion there would be more smiling faces, less need for costly medications, and altogether a healthier and more humane world for all of us.

