

The Woburn Advocate

Movies, popcorn help revive fading memories

By Megg Crook
Thu Dec 20, 2007

Woburn, MA - As clips from "It's a Wonderful Life," "Oklahoma!" and "I Love Lucy" flash before them, Peter Santamaria and his wife Irene hold hands. Peter may not remember how to spell his last name, but he remembers that Irene is his wife, and he calls her a "great lady."

Sitting behind Peter and Irene are Gail O'Donnell and her mother-in-law, Marie O'Donnell. Marie, who already had dementia a few years before her husband died, started to go downhill after her husband died. Now she doesn't recognize pictures of her own husband, but she remembers all the words to "Somewhere over the Rainbow."

Residents of Hearthstone Alzheimer Care at New Horizons were invited to a morning at the theater, complete with popcorn and soda. The smell of fresh popcorn filled the room as residents and family members watched short clips of the most well known movies of their generation. Because it's sometimes hard for someone with Alzheimer's to sit through a whole movie, only short clips were shown, while Dr. John Zeisel, President of Hearthstone narrated and asked questions to help jog their memories.

Because Alzheimer's patients lose their short-term memory before their long-term memory, Zeisel said showing them old movies may help bring back memories they haven't thought about in a long time; memories they haven't lost, just can't remember.

"All our experiences and memories are imbedded in our brains," Zeisel said. "Living with Alzheimer's makes it difficult for people to access those memories."

Instead of offering the residents pills to help their memory or make life easier, Zeisel looks for alternatives.

As he watched "I love Lucy," Peter Santamaria laughed and laughed, his wife joining in, glad to see him so happy as they watched Lucille Ball stuff chocolates she was supposed to be wrapping into her mouth.

"People don't forget about Lucy and the chocolates," Zeisel said about one of the more famous "I Love Lucy" episodes that he showed. "When they're laughing or crying and focusing on a memory they have, I find it very happy."

One of the benefits of inviting family members to the program, Zeisel said, is that as they start to recognize and enjoy the movie clips too, both the resident and the family member have something to connect with again.

"Whether she knows what she's singing or not, she was singing along to all the songs," said Gail O'Donnell about her mother-in-law.

Before Marie O'Donnell moved to Hearthstone, she was living with Gail and her husband, but she was very irritable and would get frustrated easily, something she never did before she became sick. Thinking her son was her husband, Marie stopped asking when her husband was coming home, as he used to do after work every night.

"She started confusing nights and days," Gail O'Donnell said, explaining that that was the final straw that made them move her mother-in-law to Hearthstone. "She would knock on the door at 3 a.m. asking to go to church, with her coat on and everything."

Once she moved, however, it became easier for Gail and her husband to be the son and daughter-in-law they had always been before, knowing she was safe and taken care of.

Though life is much simpler and easier for Marie now, Gail said there are things she doesn't remember that she wishes she could.

"She doesn't recognize her husband in pictures anymore," she said. "She has three new great-grandchildren, and we show her pictures, but she doesn't understand; she keeps asking who they belong to."

But Marie was at least able to enjoy the movie clips, especially the songs. Seeing them seemed to take her back to a simpler time, when she went to the movies herself as a child. Smiling peacefully, Marie seemed happy, for a time.

It may seem like a sad thing, remembering a time when life was easier and one could remember the most basic things. Zeisel travels around the country, putting on the same workshop, but it's a sense of accomplishment that he gets from the workshops, not sadness.

"The reason we do this is to create a time where there's no Alzheimer's in the room," Zeisel said. "There's a great deal of joy in being able to bring people to that point."

"It's sad that we're no longer young, but it's OK," he added. "Emotional feelings are what life's all about. Why would we consider giving someone's life back sad?"



Photo by Holly Schmidt
Irene Santamaria, left, holds hands with her husband, Peter, while watching clips of old movies and television shows at New Horizons.