

Educator works to help better care for those with dementia

SPECIAL TO THE PROFILE

Birthdays, anniversaries, names, faces – memories. No matter how ingrained, how cherished, memories both big and small can be lost over time.

Alzheimer's disease – just one of many types of dementia – affects roughly 5.8 million Americans, according to the Alzheimer's Association. Although Alzheimer's and related dementia is widespread in older adults, many caregivers and loved ones don't fully understand the disease and its effects.

Julie Walker, dementia care director for Hickory-based Affinity Living Group, is working to change that.

"The educational piece for dementia is very important, because the better we understand the disease folks are suffering, the better we can modify the ways we work and approach them," Walker said. "The more people we touch by educating, the more people we can help."

Walker spends her days training care teams at ALG

communities across the Southeast, creating educational documents to be shared throughout the company and speaking at conferences and events to educate the public on types of dementia and the care needed for those afflicted.

"It is so important the community is aware," Walker said. "There are over 110 types of dementia. Alzheimer's is the one you hear most often, but the other types are just as important and significant. By training the public on these differences and similarities in the diseases, it helps bring more awareness and helps reach the community and say, 'You are not alone.'"

With so many caregivers and families caring for loved ones at home, Walker said, it is important that they understand the "why" that comes with behaviors related to dementia. The disease is more than just forgetting current moments, it is reliving past moments which can trigger aggressive and regressive behaviors.

Family members struggle with emotion, because "their mother should know better," Walker said. "When in actuality, their mother didn't ask for this – she didn't purchase this disease on sale. This disease chose her. The things she's doing are the disease – not the person."

Walker said helping caregivers and families make a distinction between the disease and the person they love helps them start to understand why certain behaviors occur. She aims to be an educational resource for families and caregivers, both by working inside ALG communities and speaking to outside groups.

Walker, a Burke County native, approaches education non-traditionally, especially when it comes to training care teams at ALG's assisted living and memory care communities. She works to make her training interactive and tailors it to the group receiving the information.

"I am not a traditional educator," Walker said. "I



Julie Walker, center, talks with two Springs of Catawba team members about how to face the challenges that come with caring for residents with dementia.

apply the education to real-life simulations and get on the level of the people I'm working with – because they really need to understand the 'why' and the

'how' this disease works, this produces better outcomes." When Walker isn't sharing information face-to-face with caregivers, she

works behind the scenes to research, pilot and implement creative, innovative new ways to improve the lives of those suffering

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Julie Walker, center, talks with two Springs of Catawba team members about how to face the challenges that come with caring for residents with dementia.

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from dementia. Currently, she is working on projects including music therapy, aromatherapy and light therapy.

"We're finding music is calming to the soul, and rhythm is one of the last things you lose on this journey," Walker said. "We develop rhythm in the womb with our mother's heartbeat, and when we pass away rhythm is the last thing we lose."

Studies show that 60 megahertz of music are calming and soothing. Consistency in beats is memorable, even for those suffering from dementia.

Research is underway in partnership with Chapel Hill regarding the effects of aromatherapy on memory care residents. Lavender, a naturally-soothing scent, can be used at bedtime to naturally calm and relax residents, while lemon can be used to induce appetites.

"As we move forward with aromatherapy, we want to have warm towels at mealtimes for our residents, they can take a warm towel that's lemon-scented and wipe their hands," Walker said. "The goal is

to stimulate their appetite, so residents eat more and maintain healthy weight." Light therapy is based on the Circadian rhythm and how light affects mood and behaviors.

"In some of our communities, we have installed a special light system. The lights are programmed to simulate natural outside light, at certain times lights start to come up, so we're naturally waking our residents," Walker said. "The light comes up gradually and residents wake on their own, making it a more eventful day for them. They're not shaken – they're stirred."

The lights remain high in hallways and common areas throughout the day, giving residents more energy for exercise and active participation in activities. As the day goes down, the lights go down, and residents can naturally fall asleep.

"We're finding residents are sleeping better, their moods are better, they have more participation, and we are seeing reduction in depression rates and fall rates," Walker said.

Walker said she truly has the best job, and she loves

to see the "light go off" in someone she's educating, knowing they understand dementia a little more than before she interacted with them. The best part, she said, is being able to serve a generation of individuals who have served so much themselves.

"The people we serve created our world, they built our country, they built our towns. They were the folks that were in the furniture and the knitting business and created the industry in North Carolina and the surrounding states that we service," Walker said. "It is up to us to give that back to them."

With more than 100 communities in 5 states, Affinity Living Group, based in Hickory, NC, is the largest senior housing provider in the southeastern United States. Affinity's mission is to provide a full continuum of housing and care services for older adults, delivered by a team of passionate and respectful professionals, at locations throughout the United States. We strive daily to create the best life for all we serve.

needs of the residents of the Catawba Valley region since 1911 with a commitment to delivering high quality and compassionate care with a focus on patient satisfaction and clinical outcomes. Frye Regional Medical Center includes a 355-bed acute care hospital, home to the Frye Heart Center, Brain Center, Can-

cer Center, General and Bariatric Surgery, Emergency Services, Advanced Orthopedics, Neurosciences, Women's Birthing Center and Inpatient Rehabilitation. The system also includes the Frye South Campus, an inpatient adult

behavioral health treatment center designed to provide therapeutic stabilization. Frye Regional also offers the region access to more than 60 primary care and specialty care providers through the FryeCare Physicians Network.

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