

A Day away for those with Dementia

By Julie Ireton

Having a few minutes to escape the house for a quiet coffee or to catch up with a friend is just about impossible for someone looking after a spouse with Alzheimer's or dementia.

"Day Away allows me just to sit at Bridgehead and read the paper," says Linda Assad-Butcher.

Day Away is a program provided by Abbotsford House at the Glebe Centre. It gives the caregiver a break, but also provides important stimulation to the dementia patient.

"I know he enjoys it. They sing, play bingo, do trivia, go for walk and , when the van is available, they will go for picnics or visits to museums. They play pool, shuffle board and mini putt," explains Assad-Butcher.

Abbotsford's Day Away program began about 15 years ago. It started out offering respite one day a week. "The program now operates four days per week," says Janice Bridgewater, director of Community Programs with Abbotsford House at the Glebe Centre.



Bridgewater says they started the program because staff recognized the need for people suffering from dementia to participate in activities that make them feel good about themselves.

"The program gives them a chance to meet new friends and experience new things, all in a safe and supportive environment," she says.

Assad-Butcher notes her husband, Robert Butcher, is quite physically fit, but he suffers from an early form of dementia, which has also stolen his ability to speak. Butcher is just 66-years-old, and a former executive. His wife says his transformation over the past few years has been tragic and difficult.

"He lives in the moment now. I found a big change when I started taking him there. He really likes the girls who work there," she laughs. "They always give big hugs. He's quite comfortable there. All the volunteers and coordinators are exceptional. They all know him."

While Assad-Butcher says the days at Abbotsford are an important break for her, she says her husband is always eager to go and he really benefits from getting out of the house and mixing with others.

"I drop him off at 9:30, then I'm on my own. At 3 o'clock, I pick him up."

The program costs 30 dollars a day. Assad-Butcher says it's much cheaper than the 75 dollars a day charged by other agencies in the city.

Bridgewater says the costs are lower thanks to some government money and local fundraising.

“We receive both provincial and municipal funding which accounts for about 50 per cent of our operating budget. Client fees represent 30 per cent and the organization contributes the remaining 20 per cent.”

Bridgewater says people with Alzheimer’s disease need to “use it or lose it”, so the Day Away program allows them to put their social and cognitive skills to work.

“The earlier in the disease that people get involved in programs – the more effective the program can be at accomplishing these objectives. If caregivers wait too long into the disease to try and get their family member involved – it can be very stressful for the person – to try and cope with new people, places and things.”

Assad-Butcher says she only discovered the Day Away program ten months ago, but she says she wishes she’d known about it sooner. Her husband’s disease has now progressed to the point that she can no longer take care of him herself. He’s getting a bit more aggressive and is starting to wander. She’s had to place him in a retirement residence while he waits for placement in a subsidized long-term care facility.

“I wrote Abbotsford a cheque before I left. And I’d like to do volunteering for them. We need to promote programs like this. It was great for me and great for him,” says Assad-Butcher.

The Day Away Program at Abbotsford is a small operation. It depends on community support and volunteers to keep it going. If you’re interested in participating or helping out, please get in touch with Abbotsford at Glebe Centre at 613-230-5730.