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# 'Validation' provides purpose, peace for those with dementia

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It's Monday morning, and a small group of friends are sitting in a circle with bright natural light streaming through the windows of Krissy Wuerdeman's farmhouse in Hollis.

Wuerdeman plays John Denver's "Sunshine on my Shoulders," and 83-year-old Joan Kilday starts singing along. Her friend Elfriede Rauscher, 87, sits silently while her younger peer Doug Mook, closes his eyes and smiles. The song ends and the group begins talking about Denver's music. They talk about what they are thankful for. They talk about loved ones who have passed. They talk about the work they have done to help others in the community. They talk about food — especially desserts.



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Krissy Wuerdeman, left, works with Doug Mook at That Place You Know in Hollis. (GRETCHEN GROSKY/Union Leader)



There's a special bond between this group of friends, a bond borne out of a difficult journey none of them wanted to take.

Each one has a progressive memory disorder such as Alzheimer's disease or dementia, and they all require daily care. That's what Wuerdeman provides with her memory program called That Place You Know.

It's a home-based adult day program that's more like a retreat. There's a stew cooking in the oven for lunch. There's morning talks and music in the living room. There's time spent around a large farm table making crafts, like decorative Thanksgiving plates to bring to their holiday meals.

But what makes That Place You Know special is not the bucolic setting or the comforts of home. It's a unique communication method Wuerdeman spent three years learning called "Validation."

It's a program based in empathy and listening, designed to help the caregiver see the disease through their loved one's eyes while helping them cope with unresolved issues as they approach the final stages of life. It's a widely accepted method in Europe and gaining momentum in the United

States.

It uses music, art and meditation to get the person talking about their feelings as a way to reduce stress and to help caregivers understand the motivations behind their behaviors.

Wuerdeman says she is the only person north of Pennsylvania using the approach in a home-based program.

"You meet their emotions with love not fear," she said. "You're telling them 'I'm here to share your journey with you.'"

Kilday's daughter Kathleen Moynihan said her mother looks forward to her days in the program and that it's provided her family with a new understanding of her struggle.

"There's no way my family would be able to do this without (Wuerdeman)," Moynihan said. "She has a gift."

Validation in action

It's a method better understood by seeing, rather than explaining.

During the morning welcome, Mook talks about why taking walks makes him happy.

"You walk and it gets warmer and warmer, and then a breeze comes and takes it all away," Mook said.

But the talk sparks anxiety. He begins talking about the afternoon walk he is expecting to take, and he starts asking the whereabouts of his wife, Julie, and expresses a need for her to pick him up. He turns toward the door.

Wuerdeman goes to him, gets down on a knee and puts his hands in hers. She doesn't tell him where his wife is or what time she will be there, but rather reassures Mook by asking him questions about walking and Julie, the love of his life.

Mook relaxes by talking about how their marriage came to be. It was Mook making good on his dying mother's wish to see him married to a wonderful woman.

"I feel her heart in mine," he says of his mother.

The group then begins to talk about their own departed loved ones and how those people are always there with them.

"You can miss them, but you can never lose them," Mook said.

That's the peace that Wuerdeman says the program provides.

"Just because your loved one has memory loss doesn't mean there has to be a disconnect," she said. "It gives us a sense of peace and shows we're all connected."

A method learned with mom

Wuerdeman opened her home to those with memory issues in December 2016, shortly after losing her own mother to Alzheimer's disease. She had been her mom's caretaker for several years and was looking for a way to keep communicating with her as the disease progressed. She found the Validation method and spent three years learning it.

"It was an inspiration, and I knew Validation worked. I couldn't just share it with my mom," she said.

The program aims to provide a person a purpose. For her mom, it was making sure she waved goodbye to Wuerdeman's children as they got on the bus, helping to pack their lunches, and sometimes jumping in to fold their clothes.

"It was a way for her to say 'I'm still relevant,' and I think that's so important," Wuerdeman said. "My kids got to know grandma in a number of different ways."

And Wuerdeman learned communication doesn't just happen with words.

"We could communicate with a touch or a stare, and it goes a long way," Wuerdeman said. "She was able to be here."

Wuerdeman's two children play a large part in That Place You Know.

"They love it. These people are their family too," Wuerdeman said.

A day in their shoes

Every person who attends That Place You Know has their own role. Rauscher is the gardener. Mook is the "official taste tester." Kilday shares her gift of singing.

"Each person has a role, and it's a meaningful role. It gives them a sense of purpose," Wuerdeman said.

They work together all day and among them, "there is no judgment. They are 100 percent, unconditionally accepted by the group," Wuerdeman said.

They have come together in special ways, such as making jams, candles, soap and baked goods to sell at Hollis' Old Home Days to raise money for the Alzheimer's Association. They had hoped to raise \$150 but smashed their goal, raising \$347 with their handiwork.

On this day, Kilday lit up when she heard they would be helping another favorite charity of theirs — The Stork Project. Together, the group folds and categorizes the clothing that will be given to infants in need.

"She's always been a person who is giving of herself and about helping people. It was a big thing for her, but she had stopped," said Kilday's daughter. "Now she's coming home and saying 'we're doing something to help babies.'"

Wuerdeman said the work is another method of keeping them together and validating their purpose.

"It's important because they still have so much to give and give back," Wuerdeman said.

For the families

Werner Rauscher of Amherst drops his wife Elfriede off at Wuerdeman's three times a week. They will be married 60 years in December. She was diagnosed with Alzheimer's three years ago.

He had sought help with her care through an assisted living program, but found she was not getting the personalized care or attention she needed. He turned to Wuerdeman in July.

At Elfriede's last neurological appointment, the doctor noted her improvement. He said it's hope, but he's knows there's no coming back from this disease.

"I am hoping to keep her at the level she is now for awhile," he said. "If life could continue as it is now, it would be very good but the disease is progressing."

Kilday is at Wuerdeman's each weekday, dropped off by Moynihan. Moynihan said she's convinced the Validation method is helping her mother. It's also helped her understand what her mother is going through.

"It helps me to be able to communicate with her," she said. "I realize I have to step into her life to be able to make that happen."

She said if not for Wuerdeman, Kilday would be in a facility. She again speaks of Wuerdeman having "a gift."

Wuerdeman says she is the one who is rewarded and feels blessed these families trust her with the loved ones who have given them so much. She said the gift is seeing them at peace in their final stages of life.

"To die in peace is a wonderful thing," she said. "Don't we all want that?"

*Silver Linings is a continuing Union Leader/Sunday news report focusing on the issues of New Hampshire's aging population and seeking out solutions. Union Leader reporter Gretchen Grosky*

*would like to hear from readers about issues related to aging. She can be reached at ggrosky@unionleader.com or (603) 206-7739. See more at [www.unionleader.com/aging](http://www.unionleader.com/aging) (<http://www.unionleader.com/section/news2001>).*