

# The Journal of DementiaCare

For all who work with people with dementia

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## Remembering together



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# Remembering Together

Participants from 25 reminiscence projects involving people with dementia and their carers across Europe are to gather in Germany in June. They will bring with them some colourful luggage: wall hangings, embroidered cushions and major art works. **Catherine Ross** finds out why

The European Reminiscence Network launched its current project, Remembering Together, in Belfast in September 2010. Soon it will celebrate the project's conclusion at a conference in Kassel, Germany in June 2012. The project has involved partners from 10 EU countries: Great Britain and Northern Ireland, France, Germany, Netherlands, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Spain, Poland, Finland and Ireland. It is co-ordinated by Pam Schweitzer, founder of the European Reminiscence Network, and funded by the European Union Grundtvig Learning Partnership.

Each country has delivered at least two programmes, all with a common approach: to offer people with dementia and their carers an opportunity to share life stories and personal memories in arts-based reminiscence sessions. Every project has involved an artist working with the group in some way, for example, a visual artist, dancer, theatre worker, embroidery expert or musician. And each group has been made up of at least six pairs – a person with dementia accompanied by a family carer – meeting and sharing alongside a band of committed volunteers and professionals.

The emphasis of Remembering Together is on using the sessions to encourage carers to incorporate reminiscence into their home lives. As Pam explains, the projects are all very different, but they share a focus on "how can we work effectively with the family carers, how can we encourage creativity on the part of the families, and how can we encourage people to get to know each other and reduce isolation."

The projects are indeed very different. A Polish project has involved hosting a giant 'reminiscence picnic'. The Finns have worked under the guidance of a drama expert, meeting at Kotka Memories House, a small wooden house full of reminiscence objects in a fishing village. A Slovakian project has involved dance and movement to explore and draw out the memories of people with dementia.

Many of the projects have involved working together on creating something that will capture some of the sharing in the sessions: and this is where the wall hangings, embroidered cushions and major art works come into it.

## Remembering Together in Camden

In January, I was lucky enough to pay a visit to one of the UK's four Remembering Together projects. London has played host to three: one in Woolwich, one in Westminster and the group I attended in Camden. Bradford has hosted the fourth group.

Typically, the projects are delivered in partnership

with local organisations. They help to recruit participants, deliver the project and provide ongoing support. In north London, the Camden Carers Centre has hosted the Remembering Together sessions led by Pam Schweitzer. Seven people with dementia, each accompanied by a partner or son or daughter, have participated in the group, which has met for two hours once a week for seven weeks. Pam has been supported by a group of experienced volunteers: dementia trainer, Sally Knocker, music therapist Harriet Powell, and retired social workers and dementia experts Sue Heiser and Wendy Hill. They have been enthusiastically backed up by Camden Carers Centre staff (Caroline Allouf and Jill Pay) and other volunteers Sheree Charalampous, Sonya Ratty with Katerina Kalo, Alex Schweitzer and Mycal Miller taking photographs and some filming as well as participating.

## The group experience

This Europe-wide project is a big-scale dementia project, noteworthy for its size alone. But at the local level these groups are intimate, homely and welcoming. The topics for the seven weeks cover key life stages: names and places of origin including childhood homes, school days, starting work and working lives, courting and marriage, homes, gardens and animals, babies and children, and a concluding session and evaluation.

The session I attend, 'The next generation: babies and children', begins by inviting all participants – volunteers, people with dementia and their carers, and the facilitators – to spend time looking over a beautiful collection of reminiscence items related to childhood. It includes items such as a sepia photograph of small children, reins for restraining a wayward toddler, tiny baby socks, and a much loved soft toy. Everyone spends the early moments of the session walking around the central display tables, carefully handling and gazing at the bits and pieces. Gradually, each person settles on an item and takes their seat in a large circle.

Pam asks one of the participants – a woman accompanied in the sessions by her son – to talk a bit about the large doll she has chosen. The woman looks confident and relaxed holding the doll. And yet she confesses she was "terrified" looking after a baby at first. Gentle conversation about the number of children she'd had, and whether she had ever held a baby before holding her own, follow.

From here, each person in the room takes their turn to have a chat to the whole group about the item they chose. Talk about old toys leads to discussion on kite flying. An older man with

### The word from participants

"It [the group meetings] earmarks time together with your loved one, sharing old and new experiences and remembering who you are! I have learned to give people time and space to remember for themselves."

Carer

"It was so enjoyable reliving forgotten memories. I would love to find some way of continuing this wonderful experience. Other people's memories triggered my own. I need to keep in touch more with my old friends to keep my memories alive."

A woman with dementia

"It's just great to have shared positive time together. However challenging it is, I want to continue talking to [my partner] about our pasts using objects, photos, music and so on. To make time to do this."

Carer

"[I have learned] that dementia varies enormously from person to person.."

A man with dementia

dementia, quiet, a little sleepy in the early afternoon, is drawn in on re-enacting his many hours of kite flying from his youth in Pakistan. His carer shares more background to these tales with the wider group and the man, smiling, listens on.

We learn from another couple that it was the husband (and the person with dementia) who was the calmer, more experienced one when it came to early parenting. His wife speaks fondly and proudly of her husband's steady hand with the young children, gained from being an uncle at a young age. And the man himself talks lovingly of his continued close relationship with his children.

Shortly after, the baby doll is passed around the room. We're all invited to name it. I think the baby looks like a boy; others are sure it's a girl. We laugh about names in fashion now and in the past. For many carers, the humour seems precious.

We're invited to make a wish for the doll's life, and the wishes are as varied as the people in the group: good health, a happy-enough family life, and many more. Later we're asked to do something that is often discouraged: to 'brag' about our children. We try to think of songs we sing to children at bedtime, and it's remarkably difficult: I sing an Italian lullaby, Pam an Israeli one.

### Reflections

In the time of reflection following the session, the facilitators and volunteers describe the session as less interactive than other sessions, with fewer re-enactments or physical engagement. And yet, all agree this was pitched well and worked well for the group today: participants remained engaged throughout, and it was right to run with the group's quieter, more conversation-based mood. The re-enactment of a wedding a few weeks ago is special, but today has been too.

Several of the group leaders feel sure that the relationships between the people with dementia and their carers are being strengthened by the sessions: there seems to be more understanding, more respect. To me it seemed the carers were enjoying just sitting alongside their loved ones for a change, and doing so with a listening, respectful, waiting pose – watching as they or others brought up precious memories.

Perhaps this is a reflection of the equality and humane atmosphere that this project has cultivated so successfully. The people with dementia were so capably supported within the group, and their contributions so well drawn out, that it was difficult to identify on a first visit the identity of any individual in the group. Volunteer? Person with dementia? Carer? This is the kind of atmosphere that brings encouragement and nurturance to us all, whatever our role.

I was also struck by the value of having older volunteers supporting a reminiscence group like this. Their desire to be with, and sit alongside people with dementia, is a deeply respectful starting point. They can draw effortlessly on their own memories of songs, moments, habits and styles of many years ago – something that may need explaining to those of a younger generation, and in so doing, the moment may be lost.



### And later on

I heard later that the following week's session on memories of homelife had prompted some very animated moments, with participants being asked to create dramatised stories based on four chosen objects. One pair enacted tobogganing down a hill together with arms outstretched on chairs, while another had a tippale and chased a cat in the kitchen!

As Sally Knocker commented, "In this group there have been moments of hilarity and moments of tears and tenderness." She went on to explain, "Many of the sessions include starting and ending in a large circle but with elements of small groups and pairs to do some activities such as devising a drama or drawing a picture. The use of music, art and drama is integral to the success of the approach."

While the Remembering Together work has aimed to inspire family carers to incorporate reminiscence more into their daily lives, it's fair to say that the highly creative element of improvisation and intuitive risk taking led by these experienced group facilitators is something that is harder to pass on to others.

The group were keen to continue to meet, albeit out of necessity probably with fewer facilitators and volunteers – and Camden Carers Centre have been working hard to secure funding to continue the work in some form or another. Caroline Allouf from Camden Carers Centre is clear that the project has led to lasting changes. She says, "I have been incredibly struck since the end of the sessions as to the clear impact they have had on many of the couples and how they really are incorporating many of the skills and experiences into everyday life. Two participants have gone on to take part in an Arts 4 Dementia project at Kenwood House where they have been exploring the artwork housed there and doing their own drawing and painting *together*. Another pair, a mother and daughter, now use the Monday afternoon slot (when they had been attending Remembering Together) to spend time together – not dealing with bills, paperwork and cleaning but looking through old photos and other creative activities. The imbalance of carer and cared for seems to have been shifted to an extent." n

Sally (right), Sybil and daughter Ruth enjoy memories stimulated by a drawing exercise. Photograph above and those on the front cover of this issue are by Alex Schweitzer.

To find out more about the European Reminiscence Network, contact Pam Schweitzer via email at [pam@pamschweitzer.com](mailto:pam@pamschweitzer.com)