

Early-Stage Dementia Care Program Transforms Lives, Potentially Slows Disease

When Dora Lawrence began creating flower arrangements again, her family knew it meant something important. They recognized the colorful displays were a beautiful and welcome sign that Dora's early-stage Alzheimer's disease no longer sapped her vitality and connection to the world. They credit Brookdale's Clare Bridge Crossings program, developed for those in dementia's initial phase, for restoring Dora's vibrancy, easing the situation for the entire family and even, perhaps, slowing the progression of her condition.

While attention has traditionally focused on the later stages of Alzheimer's and related dementias, experts with Brookdale say providing purposeful programs and care when symptoms first emerge can make a major difference, not only in quality of life but also in the condition's advancement.

"Many people in the initial phase may appear to be managing at home to some extent, but they really aren't," said Juliet Holt Klinger, M.A., Brookdale's senior director of dementia care, who spearheaded development of the Clare Bridge Crossings program. "Even if they seem to be taking care of their basic daily needs, they start withdrawing from activities they love, from other people, and at times from their families because keeping up is too difficult. This can also happen to residents in assisted living communities who lose the ability to connect with those around them."

This isolation can lead to depression, which in turn aggravates the condition. And without access to stimulating and meaningful things to do, those living with dementia miss the crucial opportunity to boost their cognitive capacity through activities that promote brain resilience.

"Research shows that programs tailored to people in the initial phase can make a big difference in sustaining their abilities and possibly delaying advancement of the disease," Holt Klinger said. "This is a major focus of Clare Bridge Crossings, where we have designed the programming to build up brain synapses and resilience, and to provide joy and purpose."

Clare Bridge Crossings residents, each day, take part in activities that engage them mentally, socially and physically. On any given day, they might visit a museum to discover its exhibits, learn square dancing as a way to practice processing information and moving the body; write their life stories in a journal, expand their horizons through technology, or make friends.

"Time and again, we see that our approach enriches lives," Holt Klinger said.

Celia Lawrence, daughter-in-law of Clare Bridge Crossings resident Dora, has seen the impact firsthand. Dora's move to the community appears to have delayed the advancement of her Alzheimer's disease.

"We do believe it is the care she is getting here that is allowing her brain to slow down the progression," Celia said.

Prior to coming to Clare Bridge Crossings, Dora lived alone, where she had become isolated and withdrawn. "She had the curtains closed, the doors were barred, she didn't leave the house," Celia said. "We couldn't get her to go to the store or to our house for a Christmas lunch."

Dora stopped cleaning and cooking; she lost weight. She abandoned her beloved sewing, knitting, flower arranging and crossword puzzles. She began calling Celia and her husband Jeff a dozen times a day.

But at Clare Bridge Crossings, Dora resumed the things she loves. "She's doing the flower arrangements, decorating her apartment and adding the personal touches," Celia said. Knitting and crossword puzzles are favorite activities again.

Dora no longer calls Celia and Jeff all day long, meaning that “we can go back to being our family again. The stress level has been greatly reduced.”

Dora’s new wellbeing is evident physically; she has reached a healthy weight and walks more steadily.

“She is smiling and laughing,” Celia said. “Her personality has just blossomed. Because of everything that is taking place here, she is going to stay as independent as much as she can for a longer period of time.”