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Memory Cafe offers respite for those with dementia and their caregivers



SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

Pictured, from left, Diane Caster, Curtis Davis and Bill Caster enjoy a pontoon ride on Lake Keowee. Memory Cafe seeks to provide a respite to those afflicted with the early-to-middle stages of Alzheimer's disease, or any other type of dementia or brain disorder, and their caregivers. Various trips are scheduled throughout the year.

BY GREG OLIVER
THE JOURNAL

SENECA — Enduring Alzheimer's disease, or any other type of dementia or brain disorder, can be a trying time — not only for the individual, but also the caregiver.

But a nonprofit called Memory Cafe is trying to provide a respite to those afflicted with the early-to-middle stages of the disease and those who care for them on a daily basis. That effort seems to be paying off, growing from four original participants when the program began last July to anywhere from 10 to 20 who meet from 1-3 p.m. the first Monday of the month at St. Mark United Methodist Church in Seneca.

Bonnie Holmes, who serves as a volunteer along with Mary Ann Johnson, said as the president of Loving Health Care Inc., she had been taking care of people with serious dementia issues for 16 years.

"I felt it was a shame many ended up in isolation," Holmes said. "There wasn't anything I could do until I learned of Memory Cafe. People come, we go on field trips, they meet people in similar situations and have fun together. The people who come don't pay anything, and it is going so much better than I ever dreamed it would."

Holmes said the Memory Cafe program originated in England before making its way to the United States, where there are now approximately 100 groups.



Memory Cafe program participants enjoy a hayride. Pictured, from left, are Bonnie Holmes, Evelyn Ferry, Betty Gray, Mary Ann Johnson, Rhonda Gray, Kathy Barringer, Dick Ferry, Meryl Love, Margaret Heintz, Curtis Davis and Ute and Bill Brady.

However, she pointed out that the Seneca site is the only location in Oconee County.

"This is a place where people can come and laugh, learn and cry with their loved ones and stay socially engaged in a supportive environment with friendship and acceptance," Holmes said. "You can see their faces. They're relaxed, smiling and happy, and it's not the stress a person who is a caregiver normally experiences. They are normally under such stress that they usually put their loved one with dementia under stress. But they're loving and enjoying this, and that's what we want."

In recent months, Holmes said the group has been on field trips that included a hayride and picking pumpkins as well as a pontoon ride on Lake Keowee.

"People who were feeling tense before were relaxed because their loved one

wasn't asking for anything and the caregiver didn't feel pressure," she said. "They were holding hands, laughing and having a good time."

While planning field trips can be a stressful experience in itself, Holmes, a retired educator, said it is something she loves to do.

"When I was younger, I was a principal and took my kids on field trips left and right," Holmes said. "I am so used to planning field trips that, to me, it's second nature."

Marla Fuller, minister of communications at St. Mark UMC and a worker with the senior ministry Elderberry program, said the Memory Cafe gives participants "a place to be themselves."

"In a society where people look at them as different, it's a place they can be with their peers and be themselves," Fuller said. "They're not just sitting around and are in a safe place."

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Bonnie Holmes
Memory Cafe coordinator

Within the next couple of weeks, Fuller said the group will tour a chocolate factory in Greenville. Even when the group meets at the church, those gatherings can include activities like a sing-along led by the St. Mark gospel choir.

On one occasion, Holmes said she even brought her small Pomeranian.

"It's a lot of work, but this is something I really love to do," Holmes said.

St. Mark United Methodist Church is located at 616 Quincy Road, and Fuller said anyone interested in attending can simply show up.

"If there's a trip, we just need to know who's coming," Fuller said. "But this is an outreach program to encourage people from the community to participate."

For more information on the Memory Cafe program, contact the church at (864) 882-2603.