

Interview with Anne Basting of the Center on Age & Community

Anne Basting, Ph.D., is Director of the Center on Age & Community at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

MoMA: Let's start, if you would, by talking about why it's important to bring art — in its broadest context — into the lives of people with Alzheimer's disease.

Anne Basting: It's important for the reason that art is important in anyone's life. It's a way of thinking and a way of experiencing the world, and a way of expressing yourself for anyone, so in some ways you go back to the inherent value of art, in general. I think the shocking thing really is that people have assumed that this wasn't possible for people with dementia.

MoMA: And why do you think art can be so effective when working with this audience?

Anne Basting: I think one of the reasons it's particularly effective for people with cognitive disabilities is that rational language and communication is exactly what it covers. Art offers emotional communication and the opportunity to train not only the people with dementia how to communicate emotionally, or how to use their remaining capacity to do so, but also to train the staff and caregivers who do the same thing. So, you're basically creating a mode of communication or a way for people on both sides of the care partnership to communicate through the arts, which is essentially emotional communication.

MoMA: How do you define success in a program?

Anne Basting: I think it is improved well being and quality of life for both sides of the care partnership. When you're able to increase the sense of well being and the quality of life, you're enabling people to make choices longer.

MoMA: What aspects of quality of life could these programs address?

Anne Basting: The vast majority of people are cared for at home, and the vast majority of them don't have any services at all. They're off the radar; we don't even know about them in aging services. These are the people who, if they heard that a cultural institution had a program, could be in a potentially life-changing situation. Over and over again we hear, "My friends never come around anymore; our family lives too far away." There's no socialization, which is so crucial, and there's no inspiration. That's one of the things about art; it can inspire you to think beyond your situation. So I think making cultural institutions, including art museums, part of the solution and part of the support network can have a dramatic difference on the experience of caregiving.

MoMA: What effect has your work with individuals with memory loss had on you on a personal level?

Anne Basting: In this kind of work, it's really crucial to recognize a couple of points. One is that people with dementia are capable of growth and skill building, really, truthfully, at any point. If you begin where they are, they can build skills, grow, and understand themselves more through their own self-expression. The second is that it's a reciprocal process, not you doing charity work. There's an incredible opportunity for the facilitator to grow as well. If you look at it as one dimensional, you're going to miss out on a rich, rewarding experience. I do think that people with memory loss and dementia, and people who are in

situations of struggling with loss, offer a unique view on life. They bring you into the present moment in a way that you otherwise might not be in the world of Black-Berries, calendars, instant communication with other people, and forward-driving productivity. It's almost as if because you're trying to be in the world of the person that you're interacting with, they're giving you the gift of that real-time moment. They remind you of the importance and the essence of human connection and communication, and that's a really powerful place to be. They also see the artwork through that same lens, and it's a really valuable way to see the world.

MoMA: How does this audience differ from other groups you've worked with?

Anne Basting: They are vibrant members of my community, and this is really no different than all the other work I've done with other groups. We had to change communication techniques a little bit, but it's not a huge shift. As with any different type of group, you're exposing yourself to a different view of the world.

MoMA: I'm thinking about the feedback that we have received from caregivers who take part in Meet Me at MoMA, and one thing that they seem particularly thankful for is that when they come to the Museum, the condition of their loved one, their memory loss, is a nonissue. I think what programs should strive for is this idea of normalcy.

Anne Basting: I think that's exactly right, and there's actually some research on that. One of the things that happens is that, as a family caregiver, it's as though nothing exists other than that disease, it completely consumes your life. To get out and get into a place where the disease doesn't even feel present, where you don't have to think about it for that time, where you're being honored and inspired instead, and invited to express yourself — that is a huge relief.

MoMA: How could cultural institutions contribute to this process of reducing the stigma surrounding the disease?

Anne Basting: Why should we set up this parallel universe for people with dementia and their families? Why should they go to adult day centers when they — living at home — can actually use their own cultural institutions for support? In some ways the role of institutions is to serve their community, and this is in many ways just another group within the community.

MoMA: This is really a societal issue. How can we bring about this cultural transformation?

Anne Basting: I think the whole key is in mainstreaming, because imagine if — and this actually happens, because enough people are experiencing this in their lives — the waitress at the corner diner actually knows exactly what you're going through, because her grandmother has it. So when you go down to the corner diner to have your ritual mid-morning cup of coffee and a doughnut with your husband, it's fine. You are in a safe place, where you don't have to worry about editing him, or that people are going to give you the hairy eyeball. It could be the same thing at cultural institutions. There may be a time when this kind of training is just normal for staff, so you just can go and not worry, you know? That's the whole thing — and it feels like it's happening pretty swiftly, and it can make all the difference in the world.

