

Auburn's REACH program strengthens minds, builds friendships

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Opelika-Auburn News

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(LINDY OLLER/LOLLER@OANOW.COM) Aubie takes a picture with participants and volunteers of the REACH program during its Tailgate Day event.

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People living with early to moderate dementia or Alzheimer's can sometimes feel isolated and left in the dark.

The REACH Community Respite Program at Auburn United Methodist Church is a way for them to experience joy and fellowship through activities and games to stabilize their memory loss.

The community-wide program began in 2015 and started taking participants in 2016. It was launched by AUMC and other area churches and local organizations.

"We started it because we felt like there was a need in the Auburn Opelika community," said Rev. Julie Hare, director of congregational ministries at AUMC.

Stabilizing memory loss

The REACH program is a spin-off of the respite program in Montgomery that started in 2012 in cooperation with the medical staff at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, according to Gerald Johnson, a volunteer of Auburn's REACH program.

"Its original intent was to provide respite for care partners," Johnson said. "They can drop off their husband or spouse for four hours and go on and do their business. Then it was quickly found out that the benefit to the participants was tremendous."

Johnson said he and his wife Nadine went to Montgomery twice a week on Mondays and Wednesdays to participate in the program. Out of that program, others have been developed across the state.

Nadine has been in the REACH program at AUMC for four years.

"The best part of her week is in the REACH program," Gerald said. "She feels safe and fun and liberated."

Gerald said he had taken his wife to the Birmingham Memory Center to test her memory. He said she had scored 25 out of 30 the first time, then a 24, a 21 and back up to a 24.

"I give full credit to the REACH program as it has stabilized her memory loss," Gerald said. "Without this and without constant help at home, she could be sleeping or isolated."

Auburn's REACH program meets Tuesdays and Thursdays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. in the Epworth Center at AUMC.

"It originally starting meeting once a month and then grew to once a week and now has grown to twice a week," said Leisa Askew, Alabama Cares program coordinator. "Over the year and a half we have had huge growth."

A new normal

The program allows caregivers the opportunity to take some time to themselves while also having a peace of mind knowing that their loved ones are cared for in a safe and caring environment.

"It's the only program that's a day respite program for adults in this area," Askew said. "It's a sense of normalcy for them to see their loved one actively participating and having a sense of their new normal."

Askew, who also runs the Alzheimer's program for Lee and Russell counties at the Lee-Russell Council of Governments' Area Agency on Aging, said participants are able to have fun while strengthening their memory through mental, social and physical exercises, including balloon volleyball.

"They're smiling and happy," Askew said. "It's competitive and they have teams. They cheer each other on, but the biggest thing is that they are involved and engaged in getting range of motion exercise."

Participants pay a fee of \$30 per day. The cost includes physical, mental and emotional interaction with other participants and volunteers. A hot lunch is also provided.

"If they're unable to pay that \$30 fee, there are some scholarships that have been established through former participants who have passed away," Askew said.

The requirements participants have to meet in order to be in the program are that they must be able to interact socially and attend to their own bathroom needs. On average, there are 15 members in the program, according to Hare.

Equal treatment

The program receives volunteers from the community, Auburn University's Schools of Nursing, Kinesiology and Social Work.

Askew said the program makes it so that nobody can tell who the participant is and who the volunteer is in the room.

"Everybody in the room is treated equally," Askew said. "The volunteers know who they are and they're assigned to a participant, but the participant doesn't know that. A lot of the participants think they're coming to volunteer, so it gives them a purpose and self worth."

Volunteers are required to go through a formal training program.

"It is self guided," Askew said. "It's about a six hour training and background check. We've also incorporated a virtual dementia tour in the training which is a dementia simulation."

The volunteers in the program work in different capacities, including prepping or cleaning up after lunch, working one on one with the participants and leading the activities.

Judy Guin, who is a faith community nurse at AUMC, said the volunteers get as much out of the program as the participants.

"It brings me joy to see their faces light up," Guin said. "The participants that come just fill my heart. That gives us pleasure that they're excited about being here."

Blanche McElfresh, who has been a volunteer in the program for a year, said she appreciates being able to help a caregiver have some free time.

"I'm happy to know that they're getting time to go get their hair fixed or have coffee with a friend," McElfresh said. Those four hours mean so much."

McElfresh understands what it means to be a caregiver because her husband has dementia.

"I feel it's an honor for me to do this because it's like honoring my husband," McElfresh said. "It's so important to get them out in front of the TV. No matter what we're doing at REACH, a day at REACH is so much better than sitting at home in front of the TV."

REACH offers a monthly caregiver support group once a month for those with loved ones in the program and others in the community.

Hare said the program would not be possible without the support of individuals, churches, community organizations and its partners.

"It is a community effort and we want for it to continue to grow in that respect to be even more of a community effort," Hare said.

Anyone interested in becoming a participant or volunteer can contact Hare via email at julie.hare@aumc.net or at the church office at 334-826-8800.

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