

An Overview of the History of New York Memory Center 1983- 2018

By Joseph Giamboi

New York Memory Center Board President Joseph Giamboi presented this talk at the Center's 35th Anniversary Gala in June 2018.



As I end my service as president of New York Memory Center's Board of Directors, I write to say thank you to all of the people who helped me and to encourage everyone to continue to support the Center in the important work it does.

Three and a half decades ago Ann Quick, Emilie Roy Corey, Marianne Nicolosi, Fannie Vassalo, Ida Clarke, five volunteer members of the Ad Hoc Committee of the Park Terrace Interagency Council threw a pebble into the great ocean of life that is Brooklyn and decided to create a center for older adults who "aged out" of senior centers and needed a supportive environment. The journey began when they received money from a Community Development Block Grant and a Borough President Discretionary grant.

In the early 1980s, most people with Alzheimer's disease would have simply been labeled as "senile." Spouses and adult children would take on the responsibility of providing care until it was time for a nursing home, where the patients received care in an institutional setting.

However, change was underway. From the late 1970's through the turn of the century, science made incremental advances. Scientists improved their understanding of the impact of Alzheimer's on the brain and other systems. The American Alzheimer's Association was founded in 1980. By the late 1980s, researchers George Glenner and Caine Wong identified the protein known as amyloid beta, the main component of the amyloid plaques found in the brains of Alzheimer patients. Amyloid precursor protein (APP), the first gene with mutations found to cause an inherited form of Alzheimer's disease was also discovered. Scientific progress has continued to the point that the news recently reported a potential breakthrough in the treatment of various forms of dementia.

Our brave volunteers, however, were not scientists. They confronted Alzheimer's and dementia on the streets and in the homes of their neighborhood — the daily world in which people lived.

Initially they founded a center to serve the physically frail. In 1998/99, the state definition of Alzheimer's Disease was changed and individuals who previously were able to receive Medical Day Services were disallowed and most Alzheimer's model centers closed. Consequently, one day they interviewed three caregivers for individuals with Alzheimer's Disease who needed Day Services. Members of our volunteers explained that they were not equipped to manage folks with Alzheimer's Disease and told the caregivers to look into "other services". One caregiver responded saying "What other services? There are no other services?" "Where can I take her?" He offered to pay our volunteers to take care of her saying that they clearly were the best and only center in the area.

After apologizing to him and acknowledging that there was nowhere else to go, our volunteers discussed the issue at their next Board Meeting and decided why not and expanded their services to meet this new and pressing need. The idea of the Memory Center was born.

Two years later they opened the first purpose built Dementia Day Services Center in New York State. They built the center to manage up to 55 individuals and included design features that were revolutionary in Alzheimer's care. Since that time their successors – you and us -- have never questioned our commitment to adults with Alzheimer's and related dementias. As a result, we are leaders in the state in developing programs from Early Stage Disease to End Stage. We developed the first Arts Based Dementia Day Program and have remained committed to that model of care.

Who are the people that we serve?

There were an estimated 5.5 million Americans of all ages living with Alzheimer's dementia in 2017. This number includes an estimated 5.3 million people age 65 and older and approximately 200,000 individuals under age 65 who have younger-onset Alzheimer's. Because Alzheimer's dementia is underdiagnosed and underreported, a large portion of Americans with Alzheimer's may not know they have it.

And the numbers are increasing.

But these are just numbers – who are the people?

You know them: He's the father, grandfather, brother or friend who has grown silent or increasingly "out of touch" at gatherings. She is your mother, grandmother, wife, sister or best friend whose caregiver feels overwhelmed by having to care for her when she cared for them all their life. All of these folks live with some form of dementia, which slowly steals parts of their lives and memories.

For 35 years, the New York Memory Center has welcomed all of you, our friends and clients, everyone whose lives have been touched by dementia. We have been your home, your refuge, your resource. We drive you to and from our center. We take you shopping. We provide the advice you need. We sing and dance with you. We draw with you. We sit at the computer with you. We have been – and will continue to be – whatever you need us to be so that your life can be better.

How is this possible?

- Because of donors like you who contribute annually.
- Because of donors who attended our 35th Anniversary Gala and offered congratulatory gifts in the Gala program.
- Because our Board of Directors has made a commitment to support the Center in whatever way they can.
- Because of an extremely committed Executive Director – Josephine Brown – who works continuously to maintain the excellence of our program and supports our staff so that they can be the best service providers possible to our valued members.
- Because of our service providers, our social workers, our drivers, our helpers, our consultants, our volunteers. All of whom wear many hats and go the extra mile to care for our clients and our caregivers.

Those of us who have had family members stolen from us by dementia know that it steals more than just memories. Dementia robs them of the light of their personalities, of the aura that brightened our lives and inspired us to be better people. As dementia extinguishes the light, it also depletes our own energy as we struggle to shoulder the physical and emotional burden of caring for them. For 35 years, the New York Memory Center has dedicated itself to softening the blow and easing the burden. Now under the leadership of our new president Kathy Livingston, it will continue to do so.

Joseph Giamboi
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