

Benefit Focuses On Communicating With Alzheimer's Patients

by Debra Lawless

Contrary to what we might believe, people with dementia continue to communicate with others although the disease changes the way they communicate.

"I always share the idea that people with dementia never cease communicating, even when they no longer communicate in the 'normal ways,'" Michael Verde said in a recent email interview. Verde is an expert in communicating with people with dementia. In 2003 he founded a group called "Memory Bridge" whose mission is creating programs that connect people with dementia to their families and communities. On Nov. 12, Verde will team up with author Lisa Genova of Chatham for an event to raise money for the non-profit Hope Dementia & Alzheimer's Services in Hyannis. The event will be held at the Orpheum Theater in Chatham.

Genova is the internationally-known speaker and author of the bestselling novel "Still Alice" about a professor with early-onset Alzheimer's. "Still Alice" was made into an Academy Award-winning movie last year.

November is Alzheimer's Disease Awareness Month. Approximately 10,000 people on Cape Cod have been diagnosed with dementia—not surprising as each year Barnstable County is named either the oldest or second oldest county in the nation, based on the per capita age of its residents.

November is also a month honoring those who care for—and communicate with – loved ones with Alzheimer's.

"It's tough and isolating on the Cape with our geography," says Suzanne Faith, senior director of Hope Dementia & Alzheimer's Services. Through its umbrella group, HopeHealth, Hope Dementia has provided services for dementia and Alzheimer's patients and their caregivers on Cape Cod for 35 years. "We have heroes all over the Cape who are trying to do it on their own and they don't have to—we have so many wonderful services," she said.

When a family member is first diagnosed with dementia, it can be "overwhelming. We help them create a care plan. What to do, how, and how to pay. We offer support groups for families," Faith says. HopeHealth is funded through grants and philanthropy to offer its services free of charge.

HopeHealth also trains town employees such as police, EMTs, van drivers, and council on aging employees. "Everyone needs some kind of skill, primarily in communicating with people with dementia," Faith says. Sadly,



“if someone can’t communicate, they just move on.”

When trying to communicate with someone with dementia, many people will “try to talk sense to them—bring them into reality. They don’t understand that the brain is affected in such a way that you can’t rationally explain,” says Melissa Weidman, HopeHealth’s director of community relations and outreach. “The more we understand how it works, the more we’re able to come up with compassionate ways of dealing with those people.”

And this is where Verde comes in. Verde, who is working toward a Ph.D. in empathetic education at Indiana University, grew up in East Texas. Later he went on to earn master’s degrees in literary studies and theology. For 10 years, he taught English and in 2008 produced a PBS documentary called “There is a Bridge.” This film “explores the power of empathetic attention to keep people with dementia emotionally connected to others,” as the Memory Bridge website describes it. The film stresses that dementia “strikes at what we mistakenly think is human”—our memory. We assume that when we lose our memory, we lose our self. Yet the good news is that something remains.

“I sensed from personal experience that the then-prevailing clichés about people with dementia being ‘gone’ were grossly reductive,” Verde says. “I saw first-hand in those I loved diagnosed with dementia that there are many ways of being human and of giving and receiving love that Alzheimer’s disease does not extinguish.

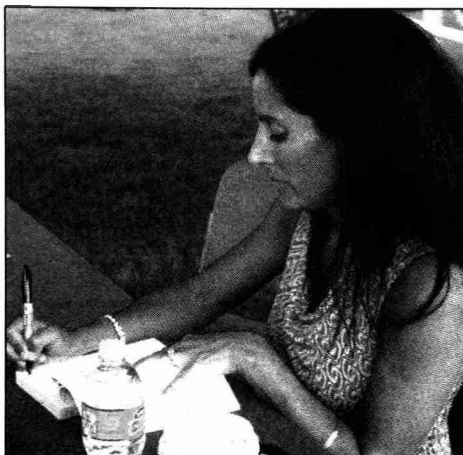
“We can, with enough love-motivated attention, learn how to be with our loved ones with dementia no matter what their cognitive impairments are. People with dementia do not disappear, unless we do,” he adds.

So how do you communicate with someone with dementia?

It can’t be reduced to a “how-to-do” list or formula, Verde says. “There are things we can do, of course, that aid people with dementia in their efforts to understand and be understood by others. But ultimately it is how we are with them—the quality of the love informing our attention—and not what we are doing in way of a technique that will be decisive. People with dementia are not problems to be solved; they are people to be touched.”

“An Evening with Lisa Genova and Michael Verde” to benefit Hope Dementia & Alzheimer’s Services will be held on Thursday, Nov. 12 from 7 to 9:30 p.m. at the Chatham Orpheum Theater, 637 Main St. The evening will begin with a wine and appetizer reception catered by Bluefins Sushi and Sake Bar with desserts from Chatham Perk. Genova will introduce Verde, and from 8 to 9 p.m.

Verde will speak on “Ending the Dis-Ease of Alzheimer’s.” The evening will conclude with a 30-minute question and answer session with Genova and Verde. Tickets are \$35 per person and are available through HopeHealthCo.org/Orpheum or by calling 508-957-0254. Reservations are required.



Lisa Genova. FILE PHOTO



Michael Verde. COURTESY PHOTO