

Buckhead congregations come together to help those with dementia

LIFE June 18, 2020

By Laura Berrios, For the AJC



At a social club in Buckhead, some of Atlanta's most notable citizens are serving their neighbors who have dementia while giving family caregivers a needed break.

More than 100 volunteers – including civic leaders and the city's movers and shakers – are helping at Respite Care Atlanta, a nonprofit interfaith ministry that supports families affected by early-stage Alzheimer's disease and related forms of dementia.

The ministry, which operates as a social and recreational club, seeks to extend the time families can stay together as the progressive disease destroys memory and other cognitive functions.

At RCA, caregivers get a four-hour break while their loved ones attend the club, which meets three times a week at Second-Ponce de Leon Baptist Church. Volunteers carry out a fast-paced program planned by director Wendy Liverant. The day always starts with the Pledge of Allegiance and includes cognitive activities, hands-on art, live music, fitness and a catered lunch.

Acting board chair and co-founder Charlie Battle, a prominent attorney who helped bring the '96 Olympics to Atlanta, said it seems that more families are being affected by Alzheimer's and

need help. Battle said he could see how much RCA meant to caregivers when he greeted them in the parking lot as they left their loved ones.

Meetings have stopped during the pandemic, and for all involved, this shutdown “has really taken a toll on a meaningful part of their lives,” Battle said. John Stewart said it is the one activity he misses most while sheltering in place. As an RCA volunteer, his assignment has been to buddy-up with one or two members and assist them throughout the day.

“It just really does my heart good to go there,” Stewart said. “It’s just a joy to see all these folks who are struggling with some things get so much joy out of being there.”

Mike Stone attended the RCA club twice a week before COVID-19. He said he liked getting to know the other members and volunteers and not having the program right now has been a “setback” for him. Wife Linda Stone said the programming is “stimulating and well-organized” and is grateful to have a few hours to herself, to run errands or do whatever is on the day’s schedule. Members receive utmost respect and honor, she said. “From the time you drive up, there are volunteers who greet you, ‘Mike, Mike, so good to see you,’” she said. “It’s like they care,” chimed in Mike Stone.

RCA founder Harriet Shaffer said the respite program is a “win-win for both members and caretakers.” She always envisioned a place where those with dementia could go for stimulation while the caretaker got some rest.

Her husband, Charlie Shaffer — one of Atlanta’s leading citizens who also helped with the Olympics bid — also wanted this type of respite care. When he began to decline because of Alzheimer’s, “there was no place for him to go where he could be engaged and contribute, and just have fun,” said Harriet Shaffer.

She learned about a congregational respite program operating out of a church in Montgomery and sought to bring that model to Buckhead. Planning began with two area pastors and a few close friends. But when news of the respite care began spreading, more churches wanted to become part of the ministry. Congregations from eight houses of worship along the Peachtree Street corridor provided the initial financing and support. The club started with seven members in September 2018.

Though Charlie Shaffer’s dementia had become too advanced for him to participate, Harriet Shaffer said she is “thrilled” at how RCA came together from the work of so many people. “I believe this didn’t happen by chance,” she said. “We were being led. We had a lot of help from above, with angels opening the right doors.

”Throughout the shutdown, Liverant has engaged RCA’s now 23 members through Zoom sessions and other online activities. Once back in session, programming will include a new therapeutic garden, and professional artists and musicians who regularly share their talents for free.

It’s these little touches that make a difference to club member Sandra Haisten, said husband, Harry Haisten. “It’s amazing what they accomplish,” he said. “When Sandra comes home, she’s more lifted. It keeps her mind stimulated.”

<https://www.ajc.com/lifestyles/buckhead-congregations-come-together-help-those-with-dementia/iCipV3CQ0bedNQrnugHezH/>

MORE DETAILS ABOUT RESPITE CARE ATLANTA

RCA is a social recreational club for people living with early-to-mid stage dementia. Members need to be independent and engaged. Gatherings, suspended due to the coronavirus, are normally 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Tuesdays through Thursdays at the Second-Ponce de Leon Baptist Church, 2715 Peachtree Road, Atlanta. The cost is \$50 a day. More information can be found at respitecareatlanta.org.

Founding congregations: All Saints' Episcopal Church, Cathedral of Christ the King, First Presbyterian Church of Atlanta, New Hope A.M.E. Church, Peachtree Road United Methodist Church, Second-Ponce de Leon Baptist Church, The Cathedral of St. Philip, The Temple.