

Music feeds the mind, body and soul ? particularly for people living with dementia: experts

World Alzheimer's Day to focus on benefits of music

By Brock Weir

Music feeds the mind, body and soul; it's a universal truth, but for people living with Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia, and their families, it can be particularly vital to their journey.

That's why on Thursday, September 21, to mark World Alzheimer Day, the Alzheimer Society of York Region and Memory Lane Home Living will join forces for a special presentation by Dan Cohen, subject of the award-winning documentary, *Alive Inside*.

Founder and director of Right for Music, Cohen has devoted his work to raising awareness of the many benefits music has on dementia.

It's a philosophy close to the hearts of both the Alzheimer Society (ASYR) and Memory Lane and one they're eager to share with the community.

"Music itself is tied to memories, which are tied to emotions," says Jaime Cruz, Public Education Coordinator for ASYR. "With individuals who are living with a diagnosis, it is the long-term memory that individuals do hold onto more. When they hear a song, when they hear a tune, when they hear something, it brings back so much about who they are and what their experiences are. With music, it is really tied to the different emotions, the different experiences, that they have lived and we want to embrace that. Not all of those memories are going to be positive, but we want individuals to get in touch with who they are and bring them out to the people who are surrounding them.

"A diagnosis doesn't mean an end; it's just how we capture and share how their journey is going and where it has been."

Mona Lancaster, Founder and Managing Director for Memory Lane, knows first-hand how true this is.

Lancaster says she has "journeyed" with the ASYR and when she set out to establish Memory Lane, the power of music was already clear.

"I saw the power of music, so we decided we needed something for World Alzheimer Day and we really wanted it to be about music because we're doing some work with caregivers and people with a diagnosis and we see the power of it," she says, noting these music programs have been successful enough to see clients living with dementia and their families come together to form a choir, where they perform for seniors.

Music, says Cruz, can unlock all sorts of memories and experiences, and is certainly a form of therapy.

"This is what Dan is doing," she says. "We see people actually come alive with their facial expressions, their body language that we see with this music" is phenomenal. People truly do come alive with this therapy and that's exactly what it is. We want people to reach out and have that communication with others, but as people progress, the deterioration with the ability to articulate starts to fade away. This opens up so much more and that's what we really want to see. Someone who receives a diagnosis, that is not the end of who they are. It's our jobs as care partners, as health care professionals, to find another way to support them as they are progressing and music is a phenomenal way to reach into somebody to find out more about who they are and what their needs are. Sometimes it depends on the type of music they want to listen to at that time will tell us their needs and wants."

Adds Lancaster: "Dan is trying to convince the medical community that we can look at other options besides medication. He is

trying to really convince people there is another way to work with dementia because I think we've all experienced the, 'Let's just give them medication and put them in a corner.' The other thing he really emphasizes is personal music. Everybody has a personal journey. When I say one size doesn't fit all with dementia, you have to look at the person.

Just because we get old and we're in a facility or an institution doesn't mean we have to lose our music. Everybody should have the right to music.

The World Alzheimer's Day event featuring keynote speaker Dan Cohen will take place from 9.30 a.m. to 12.30 p.m. at Memory Lane's base at 45 Crosby Avenue, near Yonge Street, in Richmond Hill.

In addition to Cohen's presentation, the partners will present a Dementia Wellness Fair featuring several vendors that provide supports.

One of the biggest things that people with a diagnosis and their care partners will continually say is I don't know where to go, I don't know what's out there,' says Lancaster. 'There are so many things that are missing. We want to teach them to navigate the system so they can be a little more independent and confident.'

Adds Cruz: 'We want people to reach out to us. Through our support groups, our day programs, our education sessions, we will be able to guide each person from the moment of diagnosis to the moment where their family member passes'.and they have someone on their side throughout the entire journey and they are absolutely not alone.'