

Intergenerational & Intragenerational Connections within a University Art Museum Program for People with Dementia

“This public, yet protected, environment allows for a sense of intimacy, both among the group and between participant and care partner, while maintaining an environment of excitement, spontaneity, and connection that comes with a social outing.”

The authors wish to thank Maureen Adams, Jennifer Armstrong-Hicks, Sandy Beeman, Ruth Caccavale, Emmaline Eliseev, Maggie Griffin, Stefanie Kahn, & Mindy Solie, Doug & Stefanie Kahn, & the Alzheimer’s Foundation of America.

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ABSTRACT

This visual essay highlights the impacts of the Nasher Museum of Art’s Reflections program, which engages people with dementia (PWD) and their care partners through interactive art museum tours. This program’s conversation-based tours with built-in time to socialize are designed to foster intergenerational and intragenerational connections between PWD and museum gallery guides, PWD and care partners, and between PWD. Discussions about artwork are visitor-driven and encourage lifelong learning among participants. Anecdotal feedback from Reflections participants and gallery guides confirms the value of relationship building, improving quality of life for PWD. By fostering community and strong connections, Reflections programs help reduce the social isolation that is common among PWD. In addition, such programs for PWD are important because they are tailored to the specific needs of this group. This reduces barriers to socialization, decreases stigma surrounding the condition, and creates a safe space within the larger institution of an art museum.

KEY WORDS

Art Museum, Dementia, Alzheimer’s, Memory Loss, Relationships, Connections

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Museums continually assess the accessibility of their exhibitions and programs. Considering the needs of their communities has led a growing number of art museums to institute programs designed for visitors with Alzheimer's disease, a form of dementia, and related dementias. Specialized initiatives are critical because people with dementia (PWD) may exhibit behaviors which are different from other museum visitors, such as, difficulty remembering locations or details, a tendency to wander, or making verbal interruptions. Additionally, the engagement needs of PWD are different and a museum tour that heavily incorporates art historical facts may not be appropriate for these visitors (Halpin-Healy, 2017).

The Nasher Museum of Art began Reflections, a program for PWD and their care partners, in 2013. Opened in 2005 on Duke University's campus in Durham, North Carolina, the Nasher exhibits rotating exhibitions and a permanent collection focused on contemporary art. PWD are typically adults over the age of 65 and usually accompanied by a care partner, who may be a spouse or partner, adult child, friend, or professional care provider. Programming for PWD supports the museum's mission to promote visual arts engagement for both the Duke and Durham communities.

In addition to aligning with museum missions, these initiatives are critical as rates of PWD increase dramatically. There are over 6 million Americans living with Alzheimer's disease today; this number is "expected to nearly triple by 2050" as the baby-boom generation ages (Alzheimer's Association, 2021). Previous studies have shown the value of arts programs on PWD (Belver, 2017; Livingston, 2016). Care partners of PWD also reported improved well-being and reduced feelings of social isolation after participating in art museum-based dementia programming (Lamar & Luke, 2016). This work builds on past research and highlights the role that university art museums can play in establishing intergenerational and intragenerational connections through a dementia program that relies on student involvement.

To remain relevant and better serve their communities, museums must respond to this population shift. As rates of dementia rise, all cultural organizations can encourage dementia-friendly environments by recognizing the ability of PWD to build relationships, continue learning, and experience joy.

University Student Engagement

Reflections offers 90-minute¹ guided tours that combine time in the galleries with art making activities and live musical performances. As a university art museum, the Nasher prioritized opportunities for intergenerational learning in the design of Reflections. The museum hired Duke University undergraduate and graduate level students to work alongside staff. The students commit to a minimum of four hours of training and four hours of leading tours per month, although most work more. The museum team has also included

¹ Participants commonly spend more than 90 minutes at the museum per visit. However, the structured portion of their visit lasts 90 minutes. Individuals might extend their visit by touring additional galleries, having a meal, or socializing at the museum.

Duke University medical students, often in their first and third years of medical school (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Graduate student, Emmaline, engaging with visitors during a tour.

For two years, Duke undergraduate student Brittany served as Education Assistant for the program, contacting nursing homes and care facilities, scheduling tours, and leading groups through the museum. Having a student in this role further solidified the connection between university students and Reflections visitors (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Brittany pointing out a detail on a textile piece.

University students also perform in the galleries as part of the live music component of the program. Duke Student Orchestra, as well as individual instrumental musicians, have performed for Reflections.

Additionally, the museum encourages student-designed projects related to Reflections. One such project, “Alzheimer’s and Art”, initiated by Sujal Manohar - a Duke University undergraduate at the time - utilized documentary photography to share the program with a student audience. The images included in this essay are some photographs from that project. They lead the viewer through a typical Reflections experience, illustrating program components and portraying the relationships between university students, museum staff and gallery guides, and participants. The photographs welcome an examination of the impact of those connections on Reflections’ participants, the museum, and the broader community.

Structural Elements that Support Connections

Reflections is structured to encourage relationship building for all involved with the program. This begins with gallery guide training, which consists of art historical content related to the collection, as well as training in Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) and other techniques for visitor engagement. VTS utilizes three open-ended questions – What’s going on in this picture? What do you see that makes you say that? What more can we find? – to encourage visitor-led explorations of works of art (Yenawine, 2014). The Nasher team does not use VTS exclusively, but the technique is at the core of the Reflections experience. Additional Reflections-specific training has been led by dementia experts from the local Alzheimer’s Association, a neighboring county department on aging, and geriatric specialists from the Duke Nursing Program.

These trainings help museum guides prepare for working with PWD by considering the art objects they select for tours, assessing their questions for the group, and imagining ways to fully engage visitors using all their senses, movement, or music. To connect with PWD, training sessions include strategies for communicating with participants experiencing changes in verbal abilities, including non-verbal visitors. Guides also learn how to assist PWD who might feel agitated in the museum, or need specific physical accommodations.

The Reflections tours themselves also support relationship building. The experience starts with a warm welcome at the museum entrance. Gallery guides, including students, engage with visitors as they arrive for tours. Prioritizing conversation for fifteen minutes at the start of the visit encourages the sharing of stories. Bonds established during this period support engagement during the tour and build a more nuanced understanding of PWD among the multi-generational team of gallery guides.

Along with dedicating time, the museum staff incorporates nametags into this social period. Large print nametags are distributed to attendees and staff wear their own (see Figure 3). Having everyone wear their names breaks down barriers between facilitator and attendee. In this friendly atmosphere, conversation is easier for all involved, especially PWD who may socialize more comfortably with a nametag.



Figure 3. Museum staff incorporates nametags into social period.

After this socialization period, guides lead the group into the galleries to begin the 90-minute guided experience (see Figures 4 & 5). Designed to be conversational, the tours examine three or four artworks in the museum's temporary and permanent exhibitions. Guides intentionally structure their questions in the galleries to encourage discussion. For example, guides ask open-ended, observation-based questions with no correct answers, rather than questions relying on memory or learned facts which may lead to frustration. The guides also allow an extended silence after asking a question, giving PWD the time they may need to formulate and communicate a response. Deliberately controlling the pace of the tour can make it more accessible to PWD.



Figures 4 & 5. Museum guides leading guided tours.



Figures 6. Museum guides lead visitor-driven discussions.

As tours move through the museum, discussions are visitor-driven, spontaneous, and unique to the group's specific combination of participants (see Figure 6). Guides are knowledgeable and intersperse art historical information such as the artist's background, historical context, and larger movements of the era throughout the discussion based on visitor interest (see Figure 7). However, any content shared is equal in value to participant observations. Valuing the viewers' perspectives and curiosities further strengthens the connection between guides and participants. Creating an environment in which the contributions of PWD are appreciated is important because such spaces are so often lacking as individuals grow older and experience memory loss.



Figures 7. Museum guides share information on art contexts.

Works of art often reference complex sociopolitical or cultural themes. Discussing these artworks is another form of respect for this audience. Rather than making assumptions about the ability of PWD to engage in critical discussions. Reflections tours invite meaningful exchange and diverse opinions. Intergenerational sharing of perspectives and life experiences happens between visitors, museum staff, and students in a way that rarely takes place in other museum interactions. Discussions are full of laughter, lively moments, and genuine curiosity (see Figure 8).



Figures 8. Museum discussions full of laughter.

Beyond looking at artwork, half of the tours conclude with live music in the galleries and the other half end with an art-making activity (see Figure 9). The following image highlights the live music component of the program, with a performance from a local bluegrass trio who have played repeatedly for Reflections. Other music groups have spanned a variety of genres, including jazz, hip-hop, and classical. The musicians are hired by the museum and work with staff in advance to coordinate their song selections with the tour's featured artwork.



Figures 9. Live music in the galleries.

The following images depicts a tour which culminated in an interactive art-making activity. Past art activities include collages, watercolor painting, printmaking with stamps, and decorative crafts. Guides offer modifications to accommodate a range of abilities. During the tour depicted here, visitors photographed architectural details in the museum using Polaroid cameras (see Figure 10).



Figures 10. Photographing architectural details.

Working in pairs, participants selected a detail to photograph, framed their image, and titled the photograph (see Figure 11). The activity concluded with participants' images displayed on a temporary "Reflections Gallery" panel (see Figure 12).



Figures 11. Photographing architecture.

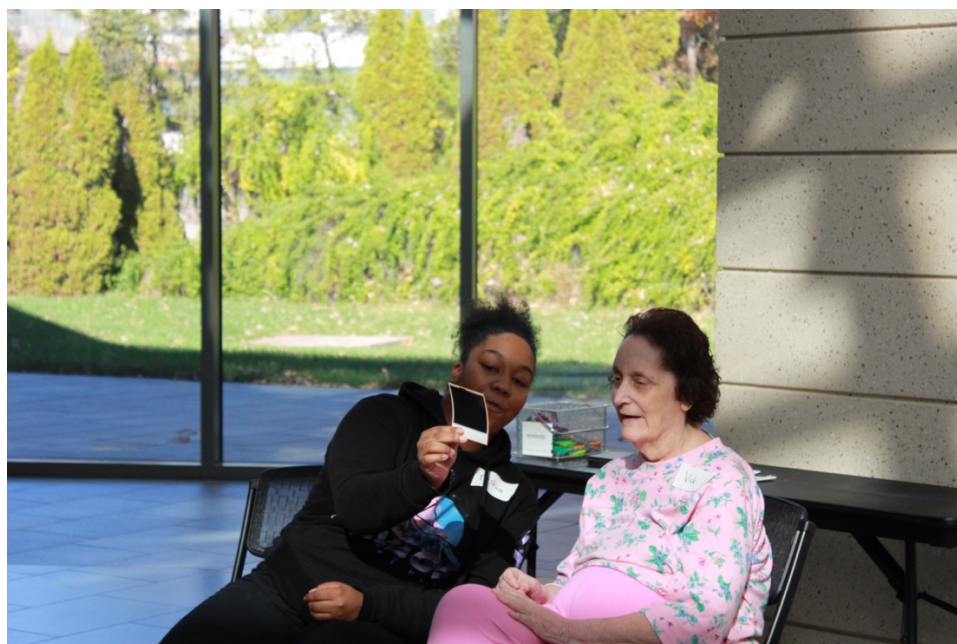


Figures 12. "Reflections Gallery" panel.

Program Evaluation and Community Impact

Perhaps the largest impact of Reflections is the connections, both intergenerational and intragenerational, it builds. Participants bond with each other, as well as with the gallery guides and other museum staff.

The Nasher's unique position as a university art museum allows for intergenerational relationships, particularly between students and visitors. Gallery guide and undergraduate student Sujal expressed the value of intergenerational connections while in college: "since most of the people I interact with are ages eighteen to twenty-two, spending time with Reflections participants has given me a new perspective on my experiences and goals." Such intergenerational connections are seen in the photograph below, with a visitor with dementia and her care partner discussing a Polaroid image (see Figure 13).



Figures 13. Care partners discuss Polaroid image.

The museum surveys participants at the end of each tour in part to better understand how visitors experience these connections. Responses have been overwhelmingly positive, and many open-ended comments focus on the relationships formed through the program. One tour participant shared, "The warmth and smiles of the [guides] does not go unnoticed or unappreciated. It is wonderful to come up the steps and through the doors to be greeted by friends." Another visitor, a care partner, commented, "Perhaps the greatest impact of that one hour was the warmth and kindness Bill sensed from our guide."

Reflections tours also strengthen intragenerational connections between visitors. Such connections are especially crucial for this audience, which is at higher risk for social isolation. PWD withdraw from social interactions for a variety of reasons, accelerating the symptoms of dementia; ultimately, isolation is "associated with reduced survival" (Orrell et al., 2000). As previously mentioned, the conversational tour structure encourages relationship building among participants. Additionally, the museum staff welcomes

Reflections visitors to join one another for lunch in the museum cafe before or after tours. Many do and this provides an unstructured opportunity for connections.

Recently, Maureen, a non-student gallery guide, shared that a participant inquired about the wellbeing of another regular visitor who had not been present for several weeks. The participant wanted to check-in on the other visitor and the family member who accompanied them. These individuals only know each other through their time at the museum and the concern expressed suggests they formed a meaningful bond through Reflections tours.

In some cases, tours strengthen the relationship between PWD and the care partners who attend with them. Pairs share that conversations in the galleries include personal details, or reminiscences, that offer new information about each other. Charles, a Reflections participant, joined a musician in the galleries playing drums which led to his wife learning that he played in a family band during college. Other pairs have found that the art making sessions lead to explorations of new art interests together. Couples have told the museum staff about learning to watercolor, collaging together, or visiting other art museums as a result of Reflections. These shared social and cultural experiences offer new ways for people to connect and relate to one another, even those in long-term relationships.



Figures 14. “Reflections Gallery” panel.

For pairs and individuals, the art education incorporated into Reflections encourages lifelong learning. PWD who have not previously identified as artists may learn and develop

new creative skills. For example, Reflections participant, Harold, enjoyed experimenting with watercolors and, outside of the museum, enrolled in a class. He honed his skills and, months later, his bird paintings were exhibited at the town library. Another visitor brought her artwork, a hook-rug, to a session to share with others after the group discussed a painting that featured a Middle Eastern rug. Recognizing the ability for PWD to continue learning and growing, and to connect that growth to their own lives, is a key component to any creative initiative (Power, 2017).

Social isolation threatens the physical and mental health of older adults and, in particular, PWD. The connections that are possible in a museum-based program, such as Reflections, can improve quality of life for PWD and positively impact the broader community by expanding awareness and decreasing stigma related to memory loss. Museum staff, university students, and other museum visitors have a chance to see PWD as full people with skills, interests, and stories to tell. In the words of two Reflections participants, “Our world is shrinking rapidly; friendships get cut off. This is a great way to meet like-minded people” and “The fact that we come back repeatedly means we can build friendships.”

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