

# CAPITOL HILL TIMES

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4/6/2011 12:56:00 PM

## **Art program to brighten life for those with dementia**

**By Gwen Davis**

The final stages of life are just as beautiful as all others.

This is why the Frye Art Museum on First Hill is introducing a new social opportunity for people living with dementia. The Here:now program, which begins in April, is a series of tours and art-making activities for people living with dementia and for their caregivers.

By partnering with leading Alzheimer's associations, the Frye will deliver a community enrichment experience that will be the first of its kind in Washington state.

"When the participants have the opportunity to learn and be intellectually stimulated, we see a positive effect on their mood and on their caregivers," said Mary Jane Knecht, manager of adult programs at the Frye and project manager of the Here:now program. "There is a mood elevation and a positive sense of confidence and self-esteem."

### **An expanded curriculum**

Here:now began as a three-month pilot project in September 2010 with 10 participants. Hailed as successful via participant satisfaction surveys, the program will continue this spring to accommodate even more people with an expanded curriculum.

Here:now has two venues: the six-part series of tours and art-making activities that will meet twice a month for three months, as well as the gallery tours scheduled for once a month in April, May and June. Registration is free to the community.

Knecht was inspired to create this program from her visit to the Museum of Modern Art in New York several years ago that had a similar program in a city with similar resources. "I realized that the Frye sits in a neighborhood with major hospitals and with many senior



**Volunteer gallery guide Marion Power leads a discussion with participants during the Here:now pilot project. photo/Jill Hardy, Frye Art Museum**

### **HERE:NOW**

**Thursdays, April 7-June 16, 2:30-4:30 p.m.  
Frye Art Museum, 704 Terry Ave.**

A six-part series of tours and art-making activities for people with dementia and their caregivers.

Free.

Register: (206) 432-8211

people who live around here," she said. "I thought it would be a perfect fit."

The Frye partnered with Seattle-based Alzheimer's resource centers — Elderwise, a First Hill-based nonprofit agency that provides cultural enrichment for seniors, and the Alzheimer's Association of Western Washington — to learn about the disease and explore what type of curriculum would be most beneficial.

Keri Pollock, communications director of the Alzheimer's Association of Western Washington (which served in an advisory capacity to the creation of Here:now), said that such programs bring a highly needed service to people living with such a confounding illness.

"What happens with people who receive the diagnosis is that they tend to isolate," Pollock said. "The most beautiful part of Here:now is that dementia doesn't exist in this space. They get to come to the art museum and are involved in the conversation around art and art activities. So often when you have that diagnosis, your whole world revolves around it."

The Alzheimer's Association provided training to the Frye staff on how to understand and support people with dementia. It was instrumental in running the pilot program and also helped with funding and marketing.

The Frye has plans to develop the program even further, with public lectures and with tapping the community that is interested in topics related to art, aging and dementia.

Pollock also noted that Here:now spawned benefits that were not quite expected, such as how the relationship between the patient and the caregiver was enhanced.

According to Tamara Keefe, adult day-program director of Elderwise (which also contributed to the Here:now genesis), said that the program allows for the dementia patient and caregiver to retreat from the woes of the omnipresent illness.

"It's about getting to leave that behind," she said. "It's not just accompanying the person with dementia and twiddling their thumbs. It's something that can be enjoyed by both."

### **A model for others**

Because of the noteworthy success the Here:now program has had so far, other senior-service institutions may become increasingly involved. According to Pollock, Virginia Mason Medical Center might begin referring patients to Here:now.

The Frye staff has certainly set the bar high. According to Knecht, the museum wants to be a model and mentor for dementia care.

"We want to expand to more participants and have additional people involved," she said. "We want to be a community resource."

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