

## Art from the Heart connects caregivers and loved ones through creativity

The onset of cognitive challenges can lead to a shift in dynamics between those receiving a diagnosis and the loved ones caring for them, but a new art therapy program coming to Aurora aims to forge connections between families through the healing power of creativity.

Beginning March 10, and running on each Tuesday through April 28, Memory Lane Home Living will bring their Art from the Heart program to the Aurora Public Library.

A hands-on program where participants – caregivers and loved ones alike – can explore activities, creativity, and connections with other families on the same journey, Art from the Heart is a free program made possible through the financial support of the Ontario Trillium Foundation.

“Having this funding helped us bring this program into the community and we're starting with Aurora,” says Nayeli Peña Mora, a recreational therapist with Memory Lane Home Living. “Our Art from the Heart program is designed for caregivers and their loved ones to help them connect through art and community connection. We're hoping to target all the domains of wellbeing – environmental, social, intellectual, and spiritual. We know there's a shortage of programs that support both the caregiver and their loved ones in the York Region community, so we are trying to reach the people that are aging in place and we need to create an infrastructure of programs for this purpose.

“95 per cent of seniors do not want to go into long-term care, according to Seniors for Social Action, and we know that Canada's oldest population, the Baby Boomers, are now turning 80 in 2026, and this is called the ‘Silver Tsunami.’ The population of seniors 65+ is projected to also swell to nearly one-quarter of the overall population by 2040, as quoted by the Government of Canada, and this Silver Tsunami will have huge pressures on housing and healthcare for seniors, so we want to help keep seniors as healthy as possible, and it starts with day programs and community programs such as ours.”

Being able to work with the Aurora Public Library (APL), she adds, “is amazing” and they are collaborating with APL on Cognitive Care Kits to support caregivers and their loved ones in the community even further.

Each session of Art from the Heart will be led by an art therapist who will have a unique program every Tuesday.

Caregivers and their loved ones will be invited to sit together and work with other participants to create “a meaningful piece of art that allows them to express the grief that they might be going through with this new diagnosis, or to help them identify with the new identity they have,” Peña Mora explains.

“We are hoping to have them not only connect with each other – the caregiver and their loved one – but to connect with other families who may be going through the same changes. We have seen the benefits of having a community connection program that includes caregivers and their loved ones. We see through [our Music from the Heart program] how they take this time to meaningfully be present together and connect through the creative arts as a form of expression and we're hoping to do the same thing with the art program.

“We know with this diagnosis sometimes the roles change between the caregiver and their loved ones; therefore, we want to offer an opportunity for them to connect together, rather than just having them be dropped off (at a day program). It will give them an opportunity to perhaps learn about their new identity, learn more about what they're going through to grieve together, and also to grieve with other people who may be going through the same experience.”

Memory Lane's Mona Lancaster adds that “healing doesn't happen in isolation” and it's essential for all the players to know there are other people who understand them.

“What I love through Ontario Trillium is they give you a chance to pilot (a program) and see if it works, and then, from there, we would figure out additional funding based on the success of the program,” says Lancaster. “That has been a gift for us to see how the community responds to it?. We'll find out how to improve it and what we could take away each time.

“We understand that when you first come out with a diagnosis, there is a bit of grief in processing it and there's also heart. Sometimes I see in caregivers and their loved ones that communication is challenging, so it is a nice place to be with other people and not feel like you're being judged. You're all in there for the same reason. The quality of the artwork is not what we're looking at. We're looking at what comes from it.”

Peña Mora adds that by hosting an art exhibition at the end of the program, they hope participants will be able to forge further community connections and create a larger support network.

“We're hoping to bring awareness about this diagnosis and perhaps have them connect with the community to allow other people in the community who may not know about it know there are people experiencing cognitive changes and to help support them as much as possible, to learn how to support them, as well as show that they are still feeling individuals able to create art and do different things that stray away from having that stigma of losing their memory and [the thought] they can't do anything,” she says. “That's not true. They can do more than what people expect of them and they are still able to create and make beautiful art, whether it is through music therapy, eco-therapy, or art therapy, they are still able to bring value to the community.”

For more on the upcoming program, visit [memorylanehomeliving.ca](http://memorylanehomeliving.ca) or call 905-237-1419.

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