

The Talent Around the Table: Kasey Watson



| *Kasey Watson on art and memory*

Kasey Watson is an artist and a therapist, but she's not an art therapist. The therapy Watson practices, called Mneme therapy, aims to help people with dementia and other brain disorders create new neural pathways. Watson, a member of the Rotary Club of Morro Bay, Calif., USA, is a former graphic artist and grade-school art teacher. She has conducted more than 1,000 Mneme therapy sessions since 2009 and now runs Garden House, a nonprofit home for patients with Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia.

The Rotarian: Tell us about Mneme therapy.

Watson: It begins with an assessment: singing and playing games. The singing is for fun, but it is also to see how many words people still have, if they have words. Sometimes they know the tune, but they're inserting words that don't make any sense. Sometimes they know the words and not the tune. Sometimes they don't know it at all. Then I play some vision games with them, so I can see if they have any kind of agnosia, which is when your senses don't connect to your brain. They're having fun and singing and visiting with me. That's the goal – to not make it feel like they're having therapy.

TR: Where does the art aspect come in?

Watson: I flick my hand like a butterfly and ask them to grab it. If they have trouble finding the butterfly, then I have them find things in their painting, to try to stimulate the part of their brain that's having trouble finding and seeing. If they're painting a bouquet of red flowers, I will put some red dots on the paper and tell them to find the red dots and smash the red dots with the paintbrush. They have to find the dots with their eyes, they have to understand my instructions, and they have to do the actions with their hands.

TR: How does this help people with dementia?

Watson: Dementia can be caused by over 150 different conditions. Alzheimer's is one. It destroys the pathways between the neurons in the brain. But there are still healthy pathways, and we're trying to stimulate those.

TR: Has there been a patient who particularly inspired you?

Watson: I worked with a lady who was new to a memory home. I could tell she had some language issues, but we were communicating enough that she was enjoying the session. At the end, we went out into the family area to show everybody her work. She started telling them about the painting. Her husband pulled me aside and said, "I haven't heard my wife speak two words in a row in three weeks." The session had triggered something that allowed her to put words together and make sense. That meant a lot to the family, because it was like a window opening for a while. That's kind of how dementia is. You can't do anything to reverse it, but we try to get this little window of normalcy. – *Katya Cengel*