

Dementia-inclusive theatre

Althea Gordon and **Tina Firth** report on the results and lessons learnt from an innovative arts project in which aged care residents living with dementia participated in eight performances held in their aged care home, in front of audiences of carers, families and the wider community

In September 2019, residents of aged care home Mercy Place Mandurah in Western Australia took centre stage for a one-of-a-kind musical theatre production of *A Year With Frog and Toad*. People living with dementia were involved in every aspect of the production, along with other residents, staff, families and the local community. The performances brought music, theatre and creative arts directly to people living with dementia and their support networks.

The project was led by Western Australian based not-for-profit arts charity Mind The Change Inc which, in collaboration with Mercy Place, developed and orchestrated eight live performances in the care home over two weeks during Dementia Awareness Month. A total of 463 people directly engaged with the project, including almost 200 audience members. In the process, Althea Gordon (co-author here and Mind The Change Inc Artistic Director) and her team discovered ways of using everyday activities to connect, have fun and share meaningful time with the people living with dementia at the residence.

A role for everyone

Of the home's 90 residents at the time, 20 were living with dementia and all took part in some way – either on stage, in the chorus or behind the scenes helping to make props, the show poster or program. Some participants gave feedback throughout the rehearsals, while others were involved more passively but sat and made eye contact for an hour with a big smile. Some



Cast members, including residents living with dementia, are pictured above, and on the following page, during performances of *A Year With Frog and Toad*, at the Mercy Place Mandurah care home. Photos courtesy Mercy Place Mandurah

of the more physically able residents were ushers during the performances. The cast also included people from the local theatre community and schools, while others from the Men's Shed and the community helped backstage with sound, lighting, set and props, or front-of-house.

As a 'situational theatre' production, the show was performed 'in situ' – meaning the care home was used as the stage and the audience came into the home. There were five dedicated spaces within Mercy Place set up as theatre spaces for the various scenes. At the end of each scene the audience moved on to the next space, where the actors for that scene were waiting. Staging the performance in the care home and moving the audience from space to space meant any resident could participate, no matter their physical or cognitive ability.

All five spaces selected were communal spaces, such as dining and lounge areas and the main foyer/entrance to the home. The spaces were selected by the working group based on their ease of access, size and familiarity to the residents.

The show was the first of its

kind in Western Australia (and potentially nationally, too). People have previously put on shows for residents but not with the residents. The aims of the project were to:

- Increase awareness of dementia in the Mandurah community.
- Increase community engagement and build a sense of community around the Mercy Place home by collaborating with local groups and schools, using performing arts as the platform.
- Showcase the ability of not only those living with dementia, but older adults in the community, and their desire to still be included in community events and activities.
- Increase the wellbeing of residents, their families and the production cast.
- Develop and foster intergenerational relationships between members of the production.

The value of storytelling

'Play' and 'storytelling' are well-known activities that provide distraction from the difficulties of life, and are equally important for health as nutrition and sleep, as

illustrated by Dr Stuart Brown in his book *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul* (2010). Theatre is now recognised as being able to assist people living with dementia by supporting their emotional, social and cognitive wellbeing. This has been further identified through the Veder Method research study, which reported that people with dementia participating in the living room theatre sessions had increased cognition and improved communication (van Dijk *et al* 2012). An Australian study also uncovered similar positive findings on wellbeing when observing a group of people living with dementia who participated in drama activities compared with the control group who only watched movies (Jaaniste *et al* 2015).

The musical theatre project *A Year With Frog and Toad* built upon the approach described by Brown by using theatre as a medium to explore which aspects of the creative process carried the most positive impact – not just for those participants living with dementia but also for their carers, families and the wider community.

This article follows an earlier report on this production published in the August-September 2019 issue of *AJDC*, two months before opening night. Here we describe the methods used to support people with dementia to take part, how the production was developed and key results from our qualitative evaluation of the project's impact, along with lessons learnt, in the hope that others may be inspired to start

a similar project in their aged care facility.

Method

Nine months before the face-to-face groundwork for this production began, the team at Mind The Change Inc identified Mercy Place Mandurah as an aged care facility that had previously showcased art-based work with its residents and had a staffing cohort receptive to change.

Project champions

After discussing and agreeing to collaborate to stage a production, Mercy Place Mandurah's management team worked closely with Mind The Change Inc to identify key personnel within the home to act as 'champions' for the project. These champions were selected for their interest in the project, creative capacity, willingness to try something new, and their availability to take on a new project.

These champions offered ongoing support and feedback throughout the process, which also meant the project could progress outside of the direct contact hours with the Mind The Change Inc project facilitators.

Similarly, community champions, local businesses, organisations and schools were also sought via referral, expressions of interest and local advertising. Those with a passion for community involvement, interactions with older adults and the arts were engaged and briefed about the production, its capacity-building elements and opportunities for engagement. An in-house working group was then established at Mercy Place to enable ongoing input from residents, families and staff.

The production chosen, *A Year With Frog and Toad*, is a jazz-style musical score based on the *Frog and Toad* children's books by Arnold Lobel, that is light and humorous. It follows the adventures of two friends: the cheerful, popular Frog and the rather grumpy, anxious Toad, along with their

companions, as they celebrate and rejoice in the differences that make them unique and special.

Supporting engagement

In March 2019, production, auditions and rehearsals began. Residents were invited and supported to be involved in every step of the process. Invitations were sent out to all residents and small gatherings were held to ensure everyone had the opportunity to ask questions and understand what would take place. More specifically, those residents living with dementia were supported to attend the gatherings and were continually supported by Mind The Change Inc facilitators to engage with the development process.

All activities were made accessible for people with dementia including being a member of the community audition panel; developing the program and scene layout; preparing and constructing props, costumes and the set; as well as learning the songs and dances during rehearsals. Through the connections with local government offices and theatre groups, organisations such as a Men's Shed and Bunnings came on board to provide support by designing and building the set. The donated materials, expertise and volunteers allowed the set to be of a standard comparable with local theatre productions.

Most rehearsals took place at Mercy Place Mandurah. Along with volunteers, some of the residents chose to assist in front-of-house roles during the

eight performances. This included ushering audience members to the various performance spaces throughout the show, ticketing, program sales, refreshments and public announcements. As the paying audience were unfamiliar with the venue (and it was not a regular theatre with signage), they needed extra support to know where to go, where to sit and what to do during the performance. Regular theatre etiquette is that you sit in your seat, you're quiet and you clap at the end of each scene. As this show was performed in situ, the residents and volunteers in the front-of-house roles provided prompts to help the audience understand and follow what was expected or 'okay' in this new space.

The production was advertised to the public using several methods selected by the residents including posters in the care home, the local community and schools, as well as articles in the local newspapers.

Having a high-quality set, professional lighting and sound, and a principle cast of eight actors from the local Mandurah community chosen by a resident-led panel, gave the production a feeling of authenticity which supported the residents to commit to their roles in the performances.

Risk management

Some of the potential risks identified for this project, and the strategies used to manage them, were:

- Increased volumes of people entering and exiting the home. The solution was

having a volunteer on the door at all times.

- People who weren't staff, residents or family members constantly on site. The solution was to sign up the cast and crew as 'volunteers' for the purposes of liability and security.
- People tripping or being reluctant to step over electrical cords and cables running across the floor. To minimise the risk, gaffa tape in a similar colour to the flooring was used to minimise visual obstruction for those needing to cross and, where possible, cables were run along and up the walls.

Results

Community awareness

The production highlighted to the Mandurah community the prevalence of dementia in an ageing society. The local council was happy to promote the production with flyers distributed within the council's library network. Relationships built during the production have been maintained post-production, with the Men's Shed and Bunnings continuing to contribute to the Mercy Place Mandurah Lifestyle team's activities. The strengthened relationships between residents and children from the local primary school and with library staff continue as they make regular visits to the home. These relationships keep the wider community aware of the Mercy Place residents and engaged with their activities.

The production was also acknowledged by the Independent Theatre Association for its contribution to community theatre in Western Australia, receiving an Adjudicator's Award for Community Engagement at the 2020 Robert Finley Awards.

Increased engagement

The 'community' that developed around the project increased the types of interactions that the residents and staff would usually have. Even the different demographics of the cast members resulted in



intergenerational relationships developing that would not normally be facilitated by the aged care home's usual activities. Qualitative data collected from residents through informal discussions about their thoughts around involvement in the project revealed overall positive feelings of increased engagement with these community members.

Increased wellbeing

The increased engagement between residents and the wider community also led to observable differences in residents' wellbeing. For example, one resident who was previously known to walk the halls without stopping to eat, drink or sit still for more than five minutes was observed by nursing staff to change his behaviour. Throughout the production, this resident found interest in talking to cast members and would focus long enough to sit, watch and follow the entire 70-minute performance. It was also noted that he had an improved ability to sit and eat at meal times. Staff reported that he was still displaying this changed behaviour six weeks after the production.

An unexpected finding from the project was that residents understood that they could increase their wellbeing through participation, why it was important to be involved with a project that has meaning and value and one where they can interact with others. When discussing the importance of participation, one 93-year-old male resident said: "I felt like I was contributing to it. And this is what I have got to do, because I've still got to retain my memory. It [the production] was something to keep my mind active. This is what I have to keep doing, keeping my mind active."

Intergenerational ties

The regular interaction between the residents and younger cast members helped facilitate a bond between these groups. These were created both

formally and informally, such as the post-performance staff-organised supper and the story-telling soirees started by a resident. The core resident chorus group also led an after-show party, inviting the lead cast to attend. Allowing time for friendships to develop between the lead cast and the residents was crucial for the success of the project. What began with small talk evolved into conversations built on trust and a sense of security for those living with dementia because the cast were living in their moment.

This element of 'having fun' and validating their purpose was noted by clinical staff and therapy teams to be reducing these residents' anxiety by acknowledging their worth, promoting their self-esteem and a sense of joy. As performers, they were able to enter the reality of those living with dementia by building empathy and finding connections that were meaningful and purposeful through this engagement. Post-production, some of these friendships have continued, with one of the lead cast (a young woman in her twenties) remaining in contact with a resident by becoming pen friends.

Project limitations

To our knowledge, as this style of project has never been undertaken in Australia before, Mind The Change Inc had no local resources or knowledge to draw upon. Therefore, a lot of learnings developed as the process unfolded. For example, there were limitations around the technology that could be used during the production, and the number of audience members that the venue could support. Holding rehearsals in the care home was both an advantage and a limitation. While it allowed maximum participation by residents, it was also problematic when the home encountered a lockdown due to illness and rehearsals had to be cancelled.

A lot of people were needed to help the residents living with

dementia to participate in the production and if the required number were not available, it was difficult for those residents to join in. For this same reason, there were obstacles to conducting the pre- and post-production interviews with this group. As some information was collected second-hand from family members or staff, this must be taken into account when interpreting the results of this project.

Key lessons learnt

- Collaboration is essential for success. This production would not have been as successful without the high level of engagement achieved with community, local businesses and key stakeholders.
- Flexibility is key. When working with the aged care industry, flexibility and creativity of applied processes are essential to a project's success.
- Stakeholder engagement and ownership: all parties need to be a part of the process to build sustainable long-term relationships.
- Planning and pre-production work were a necessity. Timelines, project planning, communication and risk management were just as important as the rehearsal/'action' phase. Never disable people with limited abilities. Placing the decision in the hands of those taking part allowed for a much richer experience. By engaging the residents in every step of the production process, they helped shape and create the end result and the production held greater value for them.

Conclusion

This theatre project set out to explore which aspects of the creative process carried the most positive impact. A key result highlighted throughout the process was the benefit of community engagement for the residents. This is important as extensive research has established that people need this connection to feel like a valued member of their

community. This was a successful capacity-building project because it supported residents to take ownership by enabling them to be involved in key decisions and the direction of the production, and helped to facilitate valued interaction in more ways than one.

In this project, people living with dementia were empowered to participate in a way that many had doubts could be possible. With the correct support and a clear vision, people living with dementia can indeed foster and develop relationships using performing arts as the platform to increase their feelings of wellbeing. ■

To find out more about Mind The Change Inc or how you can start a project like this in your aged care home, contact Artistic Director Althea Gordon on admin@mindthechange.org or 0438 326 327.

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■ Althea Gordon (left) is Artistic Director of Mind The Change Inc, Western Australia. Althea's mother has been living with younger onset dementia for more than 10 years; Tina Firth is a board member of Mind The Change Inc