

## Arts Reminiscence at Carefor Carling Adult Day Program, Ottawa, Canada

By Christine Novy

I attended the two-day training in 'Reminiscence Arts in Dementia Care' taught by Pam Schweitzer at the University of Greenwich in London during the fall of 2013. At Carefor Carling Adult Day Program in Ottawa, where I was based, I had been working with individual program participants to co-create pictorial life story books. I hoped to use my new set of skills in group drama to dramatize these stories.

The management team at Carefor Health and Community Services saw the potential in this kind of work and in January 2014 I gave a one-day training in Arts Reminiscence for the staff and volunteers at Carling, with a view to building a team to do RYCT work.

We began with Stephen's story. *Fishing for Squid in Newfoundland* is about Stephen's adventures with whales and sharks whilst growing up in Newfoundland. The first scene was set in Iceberg Alley and the second in the kitchen of Stephen's childhood home. Staff and volunteers rounded up the props we would need: two oars, oilskin raincoats and caps, and lots of blue fabric for the ocean. I found some



sounds of the sea and whale song and a program participant painted the cut-out whale and shark fins grey. Meghan deHaan, the program coordinator, bought the salted cod and Angela, the staff cook, made some delicious cod fish cakes for the event.

On the day, Stephen's sister and brother-in-law brought along some fishing gear so that Stephen could demonstrate how the squid was caught. A staff member played both the

whale and the shark, with blue fabric draped over her back to which we attached the appropriate fin. The shark entered to the theme music of *Jaws*, causing a joyous uproar, with cries of "kick that shark up the butt!" To end, Stephen, his mom, dad and childhood friend (all played by participants in the program) sat together around the kitchen table joking amongst themselves to the sound of *I'se the B'ye that builds the boat*; and, in true Newfie fashion, a good time was had by all!

In early summer we dramatized two new life stories. The first was a story told by Fran about her childhood escape from Nazi-occupied Amsterdam during the Dutch Hongerwinter. Fran has severe Aphasia, so recording her story involved a fair bit of detective work, but with the words in front of her she was able to read aloud entire sections of her narrative during the enactment. Fran and I had baked a traditional Dutch breakfast cake for the occasion and Fran's two sons came along to join us in celebrating their mother's life. At the end one of her sons stood up to say, "I have known my mother for 57 years and I learn something new about her all the time". I think we all learned to see Fran in a new light that day.



In June we celebrated our most ambitious and successful production to date. Lea's is a beautiful personal story about growing up in Põltsamaa, Estonia, set against a gruelling historical backdrop of ruthless invasion and occupation during World War II.

Lea's family suffered a great deal and only narrowly escaped being sent to Siberia by the Soviet administration. In 1944 Lea left Estonia with the retreating German soldiers. She then spent five years in Germany with her mother and sisters before emigrating to Canada. As we approached the end of her story, I explained how in Germany Lea's family had very little food to eat. Gerhardt, who was seated beside Lea, then revealed that he was born in 1937 and had experienced the same hunger and starvation growing up in Germany.

There was something very inclusive about bringing the German people's suffering into the story. My sense is that it helped everyone to reflect back on the war in a different light. By the end, there was a real understanding in the room that Lea's experience had not been easy, so when it came to welcoming her once again to Canada, everyone was primed, with flag in hand, to sing *O Canada*. Haley Chapman, the program coordinator, who had been playing the young Lea, invited Lea to join her in the centre of the circle so that she could soak in the HUGE emotional welcome!! In that moment, as Meghan, so aptly put it, "we were all on the same team!"



I have been learning as I go, making improvements with each new production. Each time looking for ways to play to peoples' strengths and engage everyone in the action as fully as possible. As a result the events have become ever more complex. The more multi-media, costumes and props we include, the more preparation. Fortunately we have a wonderful team of staff and volunteers who share the tasks, either taking on a role themselves, as actors, or assisting program participants in their participation. What we enjoy most about the process is the total collaboration between program participants, staff, volunteers and students.

It has been lovely to watch program participants enter into the roles of mother, father, friend and sister. We are never short of volunteer actors! As Cheryl Conway, the team leader at Carefor Carling, has pointed out, "We were all people, celebrating one person's life together. When you're all on one level, people living with dementia get the chance to forget the dementia and be themselves again." At the same time, Cheryl added, "This work enables us (caregivers, volunteers, staff) to see past the dementia to the person. So often people are identified first by their dementia. RYCT work lifts away that stigma. We are all working together as equals."

It has been a busy year since that fortuitous two-day RYCT training in London, and there is a lot more to come. Thank you Pam for your inspiration and for the skills and knowledge that you shared so generously!

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