



## United Way Caregivers Coalition learn about horticultural therapy

Laura DePrado, Final Touch Plantscaping LLC 11 a.m. EST February 15, 2016



**Plants do not judge. Plants are non-threatening and have universal appeal. Plant activities such as making sachets of Lavender and rose petals can enable connections, success and creative expression at any age, and any stage of life.**

*(Photo: ~Courtesy of Lauren DePrado)*

Last month I had an invitation to introduce horticultural therapy to members of the United Way of Northern New Jersey Caregivers Coalition. The coalition brings together caregivers, medical professionals, social service agencies, businesses, and other community groups to support unpaid caregivers in Somerset, Morris, Suburban Essex, Sussex and Warren counties.

The 503-members strong coalition in Somerset County provides unpaid family caregivers with education, resources, supports and connections they need in their caregiving role. The purpose of the horticultural therapy program, presented during a meeting at the Jewish Community Center in Bridgewater, was to provide insight about the valuable role it can have in offering an outlet for the incredible demands placed on caregivers.

Studies show that horticultural therapy and garden activities can benefit the caregiver as well as the patient in reducing stress and anxiety and increase attention and sociality.

The role of caregiver is critical, invaluable, and as many caregivers can attest, exhausting. Caregivers help with a variety of tasks, from administering medications, bathing and dressing, driving to doctors, preparing and serving meals, and paying bills.

“Unpaid caregivers often take on this responsibility without preparation or education while juggling their own lives. Through free educational presentations such as this one The Coalition can help caregivers better access information and reduce stress while providing them with support on their caregiving journey,” said Stephanie Howland, United Way Caregivers Coalition manager, Somerset County.



Members of the United Way of Northern New Jersey Caregivers Coalition participated in a fun, hands on lavender activity during an interactive presentation by Laura DePrado, HTR, Owner, Final Touch Landscaping, LLC., Branchburg, Somerset County, introducing the Coalition to Horticultural Therapy on January 21st at the Jewish Community Center in Bridgewater. (Photo: ~Courtesy of Lauren DePrado)

Studies published in the American Journal of Alzheimer's Disease and Other Dementias reveal that three-quarters of the caregiver's day is devoted to the patient, a proportion that tends to increase linearly as the disease progresses. The greater the level of a patient's cognitive impairment and the less independent they are, the greater amount of care and supervision they require, leaving less free time for the caregiver; this leads to higher levels of anxiety related to caregiving.

Toward the final stages of the disease, patient care tasks take up nearly all of the caregiver's free time, leaving them only about two hours per week for themselves or their friends, according to the study's findings.

Horticultural therapy activities that connect caregivers to plants can offer respite and fun. In the beginning of the program I gave, the 16 coalition participants rated their stress from one to five, with “1” representing low stress, “3” moderate stress and “5” high stress. They wrote the number on an index card and placed under their seat. Then, I offered a hands-on plant activity and invited attendees who wished to join, to come to activity table.

Eight participants immediately joined in, and engaged in handling the lavender, smelling it, touching it, sharing it and creating a lavender sachet. Eight other participants chose to remain in their seats and observe.

“This was a very social experience,” said Melanie Varnerin, director of community relations, The Chelsea at Warren. “While we were making our sachets we were in a situation where it was natural for us to interact. For example, we helped each other by sharing extra materials, helped to gather pieces of plants we didn’t want to waste, and made extra sachets for our colleagues that were observing. We talked and encouraged each other. We loved smelling the lavender and creating our sachets,” she said.



Activities in Horticultural Therapy programs offer and provide meaningful connections, interaction, fun, learning, creative and verbal and non verbal expression, empowerment, and pride in product. (Photo: ~Courtesy of Lauren DePrado)

Varnerin added, “It was a seed planted. We, the brave volunteers who chose to put ourselves in front of the group, didn’t know what to expect. Experiencing a plant activity was new for us! I was happy experiencing our enjoyment of not only the multisensory connections with the lavender and making the sachets, but also with each

other. The seed planted in my mind was the notion that it's not just about working with the plants, but also the interaction that naturally followed."

As part of the activity, participants also shared bouquet of lavender with those watching what they were doing.

"I think that as a community providing care to seniors both independent and those needing more support, we can learn from this experience," she said. "We will be looking to add to our current gardening related programming, incorporating horticultural therapy into our robust Lifestyles Program, which already has a strong component in gardening and plant activities. I would love to see how we may incorporate a horticultural therapist to expand what we can offer, especially in memory care. At The Chelsea at Warren, our approach to activities is for programs to not be just about keeping people busy. We look for activities to be tools to help people connect, interact, to teach, or to learn,"

Following the activity the 16 coalition participants revealed their stress level using a "1 to 5" scale. While findings were anecdotal, truly subjective, 14 of the members shared a moderate, 3, to 5, high stress level prior to the lavender activity. All 16 attendees reported improved stress and mood, including the eight members who observed the activity, yet engaged with the lavender and the coalition members who chose to remain in their seats and watch.

The Chelsea at Warren is planning a special event in celebration of "Horticultural Therapy Week,, designated the third week of March. The New Jersey legislature is the first state in the nation to designate this week beginning this March to raise awareness. Gov. Chris Christie signed SJR12/AJR13 into law on May 11th 2015. Activities will be taking place at the Statehouse, and around the State.

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## **TAKE ACTION**

For information about United Way of Norther New Jersey Caregivers Coalition, email Stephanie Howland at [Stephanie.Howland@UnitedWayNNJ.org](mailto:Stephanie.Howland@UnitedWayNNJ.org), or call 973-993-1160, ext. 534. United Way of Northern New Jersey is a nonprofit organization working to improve peoples' lives and strengthen communities by focusing on Education, Income, and Health.