



# Dinner Conversations

A new program stimulates memories for residents with Alzheimer's during mealtime. **BY GRACE ZARNAS-HOYER**

Every 5 years the incidents of Alzheimer's doubles.<sup>1</sup> According to the Alzheimer's Association, Alzheimer's and dementia affect more than 35 million people worldwide today.<sup>2</sup> As this population enters residential care facilities, providers must be prepared to accommodate their needs in all areas, including dining.

With creative attention, research and testing, members of Cura Hospitality, a food service management firm that specializes in senior living and health care, developed Connections, Memory Support Dining, a program designed specifically for use in the hospitality setting.

"Food and hospitality are integral to the memory support unit. [Dining] is one of the

Conversation Starters like these 5x8 memory cards help residents reconnect with the past and share their experiences with dining companions.

major activities senior living residents look forward to. And, for the Alzheimer's resident, it sadly may be the only form of social interaction," said Josh Crandall, director of partnership development, and memory support project lead at Cura.

One of the key components of Connections is Conversation Starters, 5x8 photo cards in a retro design from the residents' era depicting holiday gatherings, sports and recreation, occupations, and even military memories. Below each photo are a series of questions about the photo that a staff member can ask a resident to help them make "connections" to something similar in their past in an effort to encourage a



conversation. As Alzheimer's disease affects recent memories first, the ability to recollect things that happened in the past is much more resistant.

"Conversation Starters is not a foreign concept, but introducing images that residents can reconnect with their earlier life is new and promotes a positive emotion," said Deb Santoro, RD, LDN, SPHR, Cura's director of staff development. ▶



TOP: Andrew Kendall, Director of Dining Services with Cura Hospitality, and Katherine Bower, a resident at Sycamore Manor, Montoursville, Pa., prepare apple crisp. BOTTOM: Carmen Gomez (right), a cook with Cura Hospitality at Sycamore Manor, Montoursville, Pa., and resident Mary Kellerman, work together to prepare a meal through Kitchen Connections. PHOTOS/COURTESY CURA

### SIGHTS, SMELLS & SOUNDS

Conversation Starters are being used at Sycamore Manor Health Center, a community in Montoursville, Pa., that serves 26 dementia residents. “We have used the cards on many occasions and have found they are great for starting a conversation. Our residents enjoy the pictures and reminiscing about them,” said Debbie Boush, certified activity assistant at Sycamore Manor.

Aroma therapy is another tool that Cura’s Connections incorporates to encourage eating, a common behavioral problem associated with Alzheimer’s disease. The goal is to create natural food smells. A facility may cook bacon or bake items an hour or so prior to serving the meal to help stimulate the residents’ appetites.

“Caregivers might encourage residents to identify the aroma or comment on how wonderful the smell is of cookies baking,” said Santoro.

Crock pots are being used to simmer

herbs, chicken stock and vegetables so the smells permeate throughout the community. According to a programming coordinator at The Bridges at Bent Creek in Mechanicsburg, Pa., “The winter menu cycles featured stews and pot pie recipes, so when the crock pots were filled with these savory ingredients, the residents noticed the aromas more and asked questions like, ‘What’s for supper and when do we eat?’” When pies, cakes and cobblers were on the menu, the residents commented on the smells of baking and how it reminded them about cooking and baking at home for their children and husbands.

To complement the meal, Musical Memories recommendations were created as a resource for staff, families and volunteers to assist in the understanding of the positive impact of music during meal times and throughout the day.

### ACCOMMODATING BEHAVIORS

To encourage residents to consume adequate calories, a Walking Food program was created to provide nutritious snacks that can be consumed “on-the-go.” This program is ideal for residents with dementia who often experience difficulty sitting for an extended period of time to dine, and thus may not consume adequate nutrition during meal times.

Focusing more on preparation techniques, Andrew Kendall, Cura director of dining services, is giving a new purpose to the common pretzel rod. Kendall turns the pretzel rod into a skewer that holds pieces of grilled chicken.

Common shepherd’s pie also receives a refresh—the onion, ground beef and carrots are stuffed into a pasta pocket, while the gravy is used as a dipping sauce. Since pocket sandwiches are popular, Kendall even purchased a 1950’s style sandwich maker so they can incorporate creative sandwiches. The Connections walking food component features recipes such as vegetarian spring rolls, crab and cream cheese wontons, chicken tacos and French toast fingers with fruit dips.

Kitchen Connections is another tool being offered as a way to encourage residents to participate and emphasize positive culinary experiences from their past. Just recently, residents assisted dining staff in the preparation of apple crisp. “While we prepared the

ingredients, we chatted about the recipe’s history. Through this simple activity, our residents offered six different recipes and instructions on how to prepare, including a resident who we discovered had authored a cookbook 30 years ago,” said Kendall.

### ADMINISTRATOR BENEFITS

Connections tools have been designed with an emphasis on minimal cost and high resident impact. “For as little as \$100 to produce, Conversation Starters, when used routinely, encourage positive emotional memory which may reduce behavioral issues with memory support residents,” said Crandall.

Other Connections Tools, such as aroma therapy and the Walking Food Program, require little time commitment to train staff on multiple techniques. Residents are able to feed themselves, (which reduces the need for staff), while helping to maintain a level of dignity for residents. The added use of smells by simply baking an item off, stimulates the residents’ appetite, thus producing higher meal consumption and reducing food waste.

“Some of the programs in Connections Memory Support Dining may require some additional time by staff initially; however, many of the techniques and approaches once trained can be incorporated into a normal work day with potential of even reducing time needed for some tasks,” concluded Crandall. ■

### References

1. Alzheimer’s Foundation of America. About Alzheimer’s: Statistics. Retrieved June 23, 2012 from the World Wide Web: [www.alzfdn.org/AboutAlzheimers/statistics.html](http://www.alzfdn.org/AboutAlzheimers/statistics.html)
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