

with a little help from their FRIENDS

A Bethesda club offers companionship and intellectual conversation to men who once had powerful professions—but now have Alzheimer's

By Tina Adler

*"This is the tale that was told to me
by the man with the crystal eye,
As I smoked my pipe in the camp-fire light,
and the Glories swept the sky;
As the Northlights gleamed
and curved and streamed,
and the bottle of 'hooch' was dry..."*


On a September morning, members of the Bethesda-based Friends Club, all of whom have early and mid-stage Alzheimer's disease, are taking turns reading the Robert Service poem, *The Ballad of One-Eyed Mike*. After the last stanza, a member named Pete announces, "That was my favorite guy," referring to Service. In his well-pressed dress shirt, slacks and polished loafers, Pete had sat silently all morning until hearing the poem.

That's the goal of the Friends Club: to keep once busy professionals who now stumble over varying levels of memory loss engaged, talking and intellectually stimulated. Four days

a week, as many as 12 men meet from 9:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. at Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church to participate in this not-for-profit, nonsectarian program created exclusively for men. The day starts with coffee and a pastry, and may include an hour-long talk by a Chinese scholar or a live concert of classic music, a game of darts or some "in-church" betting and a discussion of current events, says director GayLynn Mann. Lunch and conversation are always on the agenda.

Members, all retirees, include lawyers, a vice president of a major bank, a nuclear physicist, a psychiatrist and a psychologist among others. The youngest member ever was a 56-year-old with early-onset Alzheimer's; the oldest was 98. Sargent Shriver, brother-in-law of President John F. Kennedy and the first director of the Peace Corps, and John Jay O'Connor, husband of former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, were members. The Friends Club never advertises; it doesn't need to.

"We heard about it from friends of ours," says Justice O'Connor, who adds that her late husband appreciated the club. "He was a person who enjoyed the company of his men friends at other men's clubs."



Jerry Fox of Potomac is one of the dozen or so men who meet regularly for a little conversation and intellectual stimulation.

MICHAEL VENTURA



Molly Tully, 80, started the Friends Club almost 20 years ago, after her husband, Andy Tully, developed Alzheimer's. He had been a White House and war correspondent and had written 16 books. She knew he would welcome the opportunity to be with other bright men who had enjoyed rich professional lives.

"A lot of people ask me: Why a *men's* club?" she says. "First of all, these guys all belonged to men's groups in their day—it might have been Kiwanis or Rotary or Boy Scouts or a health club." Her husband joined the Watergate health club, where men would gather in the sauna and ask him about the day's news.

When he developed Alzheimer's in his early 70s, he began to avoid his friends, fearing he couldn't meet their expectations. As a result, he suffered from isolation, Tully recounts in the booklet "Join the Club," which she wrote in 1992, a year before her husband's death. She and Friends Club co-founder Joan Turner met at a local meeting of the Alzheimer's Association. Neither liked the adult day care options they had investigated for their husbands, so they decided to start a "therapeutic social club" for men with Alzheimer's.

The club has grown considerably since its start as a once-a-

week program with almost no budget. It now operates on about \$135,000 annually, which comes from member fees of \$55 per day and donations. An increasingly important part of the Friends Club is the relief it offers to care providers, who are usually members' wives. Four of the members' wives work full time, and many of the care providers make use of the club's active support group, Mann says.

Describing his morning at Friends Club, Bethesda resident Ralph Wadeson, 85, says, "We sort of do roll call and a 'How's everybody?' Somebody [Mann or assistant program director Claire Beller] will bring up some subject and we talk about it a little bit or a lot and other people will pitch in...."

"It's a lot of recalling and remembering," says Wadeson, a retired psychiatrist. "That's what brings back other memories.

"We have scientists and journalists and lawyers and doctors and dentists.... It's like being with a set of encyclopedias," he says.

Mann and Beller facilitate a daily discussion of current events, because the men want "to feel like they are part of the

For more information: www.friendsclubbethesda.org

world," Mann says. "It's sometimes difficult for them to watch TV and decipher everything that's going on, so we may talk about a news story, but we relate it to something in their lives." It's a nonthreatening environment, she says. "You don't say, 'Oh, that's ridiculous.'"

But "occasionally they'll say it to each other, and then they laugh," says Leslie Herman, who chairs the club's board of directors and whose husband, John, was a member until he had to drop out after his disease progressed.

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Some of the jousting that goes on between the men is evident when they discuss a line in the Service poem. The narrator in the poem prays to the "Prince of Gloom for the savage strength and the sullen length of life to work his doom..."

"Who was the Prince of Gloom?" asks Julia Burger, a teaching artist with Arts for the Aging, a Bethesda group that provides art programs designed for seniors.

"That was the Princess of Gloom and that was my wife," Jerry Fox, 93, says with a smile. That little jab is followed by a two-finger drum roll from a fellow club member who rarely talks but still likes to get his point across.

"If he gets too, shall we say, 'colorful,' the other guys will look at him and say, 'Eh, Jerr,'" says Fox's daughter, Bif Williamson. Fox has attended Friends Club for four years and lives with Williamson and her husband in Potomac. Because of Alzheimer's, Fox can't remember what he said minutes earlier, tell time or order off of a menu. But in the group, he's articulate and outgoing.

"Once he gets to the door of the club, he starts to swagger—it's almost like tap dancing," Williamson says. "He's popular with the other guys, and that makes him feel so good about himself. No matter what faux pas he may make, it's OK." When he returns home, and before he nods off, she asks him about his day. He'll reply, "I don't know what I did, but it was enlightening."

Anytime people with Alzheimer's get together, there are bound to be stressful moments. A member whose accent reveals his Kentucky roots reads another Robert Service poem, *The Shooting of Dan McGrew*. It elicits a "this is great" from Pete. But soon Pete's anxiety, a symptom of dementia, surfaces. He stands up nervously, and Mann quietly takes him out of the room and eventually arranges for an early ride home.

Mann, the program director since 2002, says she and Beller are "constantly looking at every person around the table to

see: Are they paying attention, are they stimulated, [and] how are they doing today?" The groups' needs and interests change from day-to-day. "We are always trying to make them feel successful... we're here to magnify what still works for them," Mann says.

They succeeded with Shriver, says his son, Mark. "He was by nature a positive, joyful person, and he still is. And Friends Club built on that and reinforced it," Mark Shriver says. One of his father's favorite activities at the club was talking about events that occurred on that date in history.

For Homer Lowenberg, 88, a retired nuclear physicist, the Friends Club has given him a great response to a common Washington question. "When people ask him, 'What do you do?' he tells them, 'Well, I go to the men's club,'" says Rita Lowenberg, Homer's wife of 61 years.

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Alzheimer's is a progressive disease that eventually catches up even to these walking encyclopedias. Most members stay in the group for less than three years and leave when they no longer benefit from the program, when they become disruptive or argumentative, when they're unable to use the toilet by themselves or need medical care. It's difficult on the men both to stay in the group and to leave it, Mann says.

It also can be difficult on family members when they no longer have the club as a respite from care, Herman says. "The worst day in my life was the day [her husband] John had to leave Friends Club, because then I knew I had him every day," she says. "It was in August, and the club was closed for a week, and I told him that [Mann] was on vacation. He may have asked one time [about returning] and he never asked again."

Fortunately, Herman has found her husband a residential facility she likes in Sandy Spring. It's called the Friends Nursing Home. **B**

Tina Adler, a freelance writer specializing in health and science, is co-author of The Alzheimer's Action Plan (St. Martin's Press, 2008). Her father, an economist, attended—and loved—the Friends Club.