

New SPARK! Nature Program

for memory care participants and their caregiver

According to the Alzheimer's Association of Southeastern Wisconsin, over 116,000 Wisconsinites are afflicted with this cruel disease. Alzheimer's and dementia not only rob individuals of their memories and ability to function independently, it isolates them and their caregivers, often keeping them from living physically and socially active lives. Since keeping mentally and physically active is known to slow cognitive failure, it is vital that people experiencing cognitive changes have access to community supports that encourage social engagement and exercise. Research has shown that spending time in nature can soothe stress, improve moods, expand thinking and bring more meaning to life. Programs like SPARK! have been successful at providing these opportunities to individuals, families, and care partners living with the challenges of these diseases. As our population ages, dementia and Alzheimer's disease present an increasing challenge in Milwaukee County but Wehr Nature Center has created a model of the established SPARK! program for participants and their caregiver. With a generous grant to pilot this program from Bader Philanthropies WNC is launching a COVID-19 format of this nature based 90-minute program.

Our pilot SPARK! program will build on the successful model already established in Wisconsin and will utilize Wehr's unique assets. Programs will be offered monthly at no cost to participants and will be designed for people experiencing early to midstage cognitive changes, brain trauma and memory challenges and their care partners. Sessions will focus on a different nature-related topic each month and will provide rich indoor and outdoor experiences that celebrate the beauty and wonder of the natural world. When weather permits, we will include a short outdoor component, utilizing our close by accessible viewing deck, boardwalk, and brand-new redesigned pier. Classroom sensory activities, visits with live animals, and nature crafts will stimulate conversations and engagement. These experiences can have a significant impact on quality of life for memory care patients, especially in the areas of alertness, verbal functioning, and depression. They will also provide family and care partners with a rejuvenating experience in nature that encourages bonding and provides respite.

Our staff at Wehr and a select group of volunteers have been trained from a Milwaukee Public Museum specialist and the program manager from the Alzheimer's Association. The WNC has also recently upgraded an accessible family restroom with an adult changing table. The WNC setting with accessible trails, boardwalks, pier and observation decks for mobility makes us a unique place to ensure that there is a safe place for everyone in all seasons.

Now this is where YOU come in. We are looking for 4-6 participants to enroll in our first session and/or 'Nature in a Box' home kits. Please email SPARK! coordinator, Jennifer Rutten at jennifer.rutten@milwaukeecountywi.gov.

COVID-19 Waivers will need to be signed off on for all participants and their caregivers- those will be sent separately.

We hope to see you soon!

Wehr Nature Center SPARK! Team

Jennifer and Emily