

## Telling the story of embracing dementia

She wrote these words on our Among Friends Facebook page—"Among Friends has changed our lives. Thank you". Simple words with the key idea for the story I will tell today about the beginnings of Among Friends, a social respite for individuals with dementia and their caregivers.

The comment—"Among Friends has changed our lives"—is from a caregiver who has had her husband in the Among Friends program for the past full year. So as we celebrate our first year of Among Friends these words of a caregiver embody the vision and hope, the gratefulness and celebration of those of us who came together in response to the church survey that identified support for individuals with dementia as something our community needed. We came together to form a board, share a vision, and concretize a program.

And did we have any idea other than these words of a caregiver—we wanted to make a change in the lives of those with dementia and their caregivers—but in what way? If any of you have been part of a family or friends who have cared for a loved one during a long illness, you know how exhausted you become and how the recovery of a loved ones brings back relaxing and enjoyable days.

Caregivers of loved ones with dementia live with the certain knowledge of dementia—there is no road to recovery only a progression downhill. So, with those caregivers in mind, we started thinking of a six hour day when their loved one stayed with Among Friends staff, and the caregiver felt secure enough to leave and have lunch with a longtime friend, visit an elderly parent, or just go grocery shopping. Those are things this wife was able to do, as well as other caregivers in our program.

Changing people's lives sounds like a lovely thing to do but who will do it? Should we hire one person to "babysit" people with dementia? No, we envisioned a program that engaged the person with dementia rather than excluding them from socialization. So, if we could figure out how to do this socialization for the person with dementia—the caregiver was giving their loved one a wonderful day while the caregiver could also have one.

Space—we are creatures who need a place to move and live and have our being -- and First Congregational UCC in River Falls reflectively and graciously gave our program space in the Wednesday room and the fireplace room where we paint bird houses, make cards for the local half way house, clean tack while remembering days when some of our participants had horses, listen to music and sing patriotic songs, and the list is too long of all that we do in the wonderful space provided by the UCC church.

Space secure-- we needed, and found, someone who shared the vision of our board; Norma, our program coordinator, has grown that vision into a full program of engagement, sharing herself, her ideas—but more than that embracing the ideas of volunteers.

Volunteers—but not just volunteers—trained volunteers who attend a two hour training workshop, who share expertise from their lives as social workers, speech therapists, farmers, and a host of other professions and work. Volunteers have been key to our success because they bring first of all their compassion and caring; second their own stories and experiences; and finally support for our program and for Norma, our program coordinator.

By October 2017 we had built a board that included members from the First Congregational UCC congregation, from three other churches in River Falls and Prescott, and from the wider River Falls community. Our A-list board is composed of nurses, speech therapists, social workers, retired pastors, and English teachers. From that rich resource pool of capable individuals we found folks to write protocols and procedures and grants and training programs.

The Among Friends story is the collective story of us—a generous congregation that opened its space and gave its supports; a hard working board that acts like the engine for the program; a creative program coordinator; caring and dedicated volunteers; a whole community of folks who are becoming a dementia friendly community; and within it all a gracious God who plants visions in us of a way to make our world a more loving and just place.

Among Friends is also the story of why I belong to this congregation. Here is a place where we speak the gospel and walk the gospel and live the gospel—love thy neighbor as thyself. So we do. Thank you

Bonnie Jones-Witthhn  
Among Friends founding and ongoing chairperson  
N7494 950<sup>th</sup> St  
River Falls, Wisconsin 54022

[bonniejoneswitthuhn@gmail.com](mailto:bonniejoneswitthuhn@gmail.com)

<http://amongfriendsrf.com>

We also have a Facebook page.