

Successful Storytelling for People Dealing with Dementia and Alzheimer's Disease

Glenda Bonin

Storytelling can be a powerful tool for engaging individuals dealing with dementia and Alzheimer's disease. This is a market that, while relatively untapped, delivers great results and can be a rewarding, challenging, and lucrative experience for storytellers who want to create a fee-for-service program. This article is meant to inform and encourage performers who may have thought about, or not yet considered, serving this growing demographic.

When considering this market, be aware that activities and programs designed to encourage memory recall and communication skills are greatly valued by the people who write the checks for a relative's residential living expenses. They want their loved one to be well cared for and happily engaged. Storytelling is an ideal means to connect with the fading memories of a resident, while simultaneously addressing the concerns of a relative and the facility itself.

Typically, memory care program coordinators stretch their budgets by calling on staff talent and community volunteers to fill their daily event

calendars. Once the intrinsic value of storytelling is demonstrated, it's easier for the storyteller to negotiate a contract to the benefit of all concerned.

So, how does a storyteller go about doing this? Many of us know of someone living in an adult residential setting, or we are aware of a friend who has a loved one dealing with dementia or Alzheimer's disease. I know this to be an effective initial step, because of a call I received four years ago from a concerned woman who had just placed her mother in an assisted living and memory care facility. Her hope was to find someone to deliver a program more stimulating than soothing music, bingo, and easy exercise classes offered to the residents. She thought storytelling might be the answer, since her mom had always been an avid reader and had a career teaching literature.

After asking the owner of her mom's facility to consider the idea of adding storytelling to the regular program lineup, she arranged for me to deliver a short demonstration. I agreed to do this on the condition that the owner and the program coordinator attend with the audience so they could evaluate resident interest and response. I delivered a short storytelling session using some items I had employed in the past during school residency programs. The artifacts included an egg beater, an old roller skate, a collapsible pink plastic travel cup and a book of green stamps. I was correct in thinking that these items might resonate with a memory care audience.

At the conclusion of the show, the owner invited me to submit a proposal for a weekly program. A few days later, I gave him an ambitious proposal based on my usual performance rate. The owner followed up to ask if I would be willing to lower my fee and resubmit a proposal to include two other assisted living sites. After several conversations, we finally agreed on a summer pilot program for three back-to-back shows of 45-minutes each, one day each week, at all of his residential locations. At the end of three months, we planned to meet and evaluate audience response and negotiate a new contract.

The weekly pilot program schedule was an amazing experience. Every Monday during those three months, I created and delivered twelve programs of four stories each, and presented a total of thirty-six story sessions. The 1:00 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. schedule had me traveling from one site to another to tell stories to waiting audiences. It was an exhilarating and intense time of learning while doing.

Early on I found out that contrary to the notion that it might be okay to repeat programs for memory care audiences; this is not really a good idea. There is always someone like the retired military Colonel who called me aside after one show to tell me, “Glenda, my memory isn’t what it used to be, but I’m pretty sure you told that story before.”

That was in 2014, and since then I’ve been able to build on that three-month pilot program. To date, I have presented more than forty different topics, and I am now polishing the best of them to place on a schedule for rotation. I still visit the original three groups twice a month and I perform for other senior living communities and some smaller assisted living sites. At this point, word of mouth and local networking have generated interest in my program and attracted new customers.

My rates depend on whether or not a storytelling session is a “stand alone,” or if it is part of a block-booking arrangement. Negotiation is the key here. I currently have a great time working as often as I wish, and I encourage other storytellers to evaluate their repertoire to give this underserved and waiting demographic a try.

Building on Past Experience

I officially joined the storytelling world in 1996, and I have a history as a performer that goes back to the 1970s. My love of performance has been more serendipitous than planned, but it is quite clear that my previous experiences as a puppeteer, magician, clown, and event producer have helped to create a direct path to the storytelling work I am doing today.

Every storyteller brings to their work a wide variety of talents. While some skills might not seem to be appropriate for senior audiences, it is important

not to discount or overlook their value to bring delight to folks with dementia and Alzheimer's. The key here is to think about each audience and carefully evaluate intention.

For example, one afternoon when planning to tell trickster tales from around the world, I decided it might be fun to introduce the audience to my favorite puppet, Clyde the Coyote. I explained to them that I once worked as a puppeteer, and I thought they might enjoy meeting one of my puppet friends. I brought Clyde the Coyote out of his basket to meet the group, and after some light banter, Clyde played a trick on me. There was great laughter by the time I put the rascal puppet away in his basket. This provided an easy segue to the trickster tales I had prepared to tell. The next time I told stories to these folks, they all wanted to know if my friend Clyde would be visiting again.

Storytellers who sing or play an instrument have a distinct advantage if they include these skills in programs for folks whose memories have started to fade. By adding songs and popular music from the '50s and '60s, audience participation is almost guaranteed.

Tips on How to Best Approach Audiences in This Demographic

To meet the anticipated need for more services in the years to come, assisted living facilities and senior living communities are opening up at a rapid pace to serve aging Baby Boomers. As a result, more program coordinators than ever are on the lookout for interesting ways to fill up monthly activity schedules. Storytelling is a perfect fit.

There are six distinct audiences in assisted living and senior living communities.

1. People who want to live independently in a well-designed, efficient home located in a community of others with mutual interests and abilities.

This audience is really no different from those found in any neighborhood where older folks meet and enjoy activities together. Some people in this group may have minor problems with memory

loss and/or some physical restrictions, but not to a degree to prevent them from having a satisfying and independent life.

2. Those who take advantage of day programs to break the routine for the caretaker as well as a loved-one who can no longer be safely left alone.

In a day care group, the audience will always be different. For the most part, they are eager and willing to talk about themselves and often contribute to what is being presented. Early signs of memory loss may show up during conversations.

3. Assisted living residents needing easy access to medical attention and who want to avoid isolation by participating in organized daily activities and meals with others.

A storyteller may encounter some audience behavior consistent with minor recall issues, so it is particularly important to be attentive and focus on the needs of each person as well as the group as a whole.

4. Individuals requiring more assistance and on-going support due to physical problems and/or noticeable dementia and Alzheimer's behavior.

Most people in this audience are starting to feel "invisible" and try hard to stay focused and understand what's going on. Some folks in the group may ask questions as soon as they think of them. For this population, it is wise to speak slowly and be ready to respond to interruptions at any point in a story. To keep this group at ease, it is best to take your time and avoid saying, "do you remember. . ."

5. Residents with advanced stages of dementia and Alzheimer's who are unable to manage day-to-day activities without supervision. Folks at this memory loss stage live in a secured facility for their safety.

With this group, the interest to hear stories is high, but attention spans may waiver. Nevertheless, some folks truly enjoy and are

delighted by tales well told. As with the previous group, be prepared to take your time and avoid saying, “do you remember. . .”

6. A mixed audience, usually found in smaller assisted living and memory care facilities where security is in place. It is here where a storyteller will encounter a wide range of people experiencing different levels of memory loss — from early-onset to advanced stages of dementia and Alzheimer’s.

This is the most interesting and challenging group to serve. It can also be one of the most distracting for a storyteller because some folks may be sleeping, a few may wander in or out of the area, others may quietly listen, and some may participate and offer interesting questions or remarks. Flexibility is the name of the game for this group. Again as with groups discussed above, “do you remember. . .” questions may upset some folks in this audience.

In each of these groups, there are people with a variety of needs relating to aging and memory loss. As memory issues become more pronounced, I believe each individual craves more personal recognition than ever before as they struggle to maintain a sense of self.

Methodology

To successfully provide interesting and compelling storytelling programs for all these audiences, a storyteller needs to find ways to establish trust.

While there are many good approaches to gain the trust of audiences, following are a few examples to consider.

1. Never assume your listeners know who you are. Introduce yourself when you first arrive.
2. Project to the group how pleased you are to be there.
3. Before starting the program, acknowledge each individual, look into their eyes, shake their hands, and address them by name if at all possible.

4. At the conclusion of each show, walk through the group, thank each person and let them know how wonderful it has been to see them.
5. When telling stories to folks who are aging and have memory issues, speak clearly, slowly, and with enough volume to accommodate hearing loss and other problems that might make it hard to understand what is being said. If a microphone will help, do not hesitate to use it.

I have found that audiences in this demographic are eager to hear stories suitable for adults. Older people seem to connect with the wisdom to be found in world folktales, and they identify with many situations within a story that can be lost on the young.

Applause at the end of a story is very nice, but don't expect spontaneous appreciation from people dealing with fading memories. Many folks in these audiences need more time to process what they have heard. By observing subtle clues, you will be able to know if a story has been enjoyed or should be removed from the repertoire.

People who experience the different stages of dementia and Alzheimer's like to know a bit of information about a story before it is told, i.e.: "Here's a delightful story from Ireland." "I'd like to tell you my adaptation of a familiar Aesop tale." "If you've ever seen the love in a child's eye, you may like this story about my grandfather."

For these groups, stories that resonate best are the ones reflecting times and experiences from their youth or early adult years. Stories from the 1940s, 1950s, and the 1960s are always well received.

It is useful to include artifacts or other sensory items to reinforce diminishing memories and encourage participation. Including one or two items each story session for residents to see, touch, smell, or hear can bring about some surprising responses. Storytellers who sing or play an instrument will quickly learn the value of including music in programs for this demographic.

Selecting Stories

During a 45-minute performance, I usually deliver four stories, each between five to eight minutes in length. Although some in the audience may have no trouble tracking a longer story, I prefer to tell several short stories to maintain interest and participation.

As a rule, I start out with an original or personal memory story and follow up with world tales that generally connect with the subject of the starting story.

For example, when I share the program I call “Aunt Lillian’s Lemon Meringue Pie,” the folktales I include all relate to food in some way. For this program, my artifacts include an old egg beater, a wooden rolling pin and a small jar with the essence of lemon.

Joy, Sadness and Gratitude

Whether you tell stories as a volunteer or a paid professional, it is a privilege and a joy to see the positive and delighted response from people who have lived a long time and have had some extraordinary experiences. Telling stories to these folks reminds me of what is really important and how much we all need to value each day.

Storytellers are in a unique position to get to know many individuals in their audiences, not because of what they’ve been told about them but because, once in a while, a listener spontaneously shares some information about themselves. These moments are to be cherished.

I was rendered speechless one day after I shared some stories about rocks and minerals. On that day, Mack — who had become very quiet and seldom participated — suddenly sat tall in his wheelchair, glanced at the beautiful specimen I was taking around for the audience to see, and declared in a loud voice, “There’s quartz in that.” He then went on to identify the composition of the other specimens I brought with me. When I asked Mack how he knew so much about rocks, he said in a loud and proud voice, “I am a Geologist.”

It is sad to see older residents like Mack become withdrawn in assisted living situations as a result of memory loss. When a storytelling moment resonates with a listener, a performer may receive the profound gift of glimpsing the dynamic and productive individual within — a person who may have been feeling invisible by virtue of the effects of dementia and Alzheimer's.

Some of the gifts I have received have come from silent listeners who light up when holding an artifact or when they are momentarily in touch with a time from long ago. Included among them have been revelations from a long-distance telephone operator who treasured helping people connect by phone; a quiet and unassuming woman who told me she once had a clown ministry; a hard working Minnesota farm girl who loved horses and her dad's tractor; a proud and successful newspaper reporter; a college professor who perked up when I told a Hans Christian Andersen tale; a feisty woman who loved jazz and survived the holocaust; an articulate painter, art collector, and world traveler; and a popular 1940s movie star.

Along with the joy of meeting and sharing stories with so many amazing people comes a deep sense of sadness when I learn that one of my friends will never be in the audience again. Yet with this sad news, I am left with an overwhelming feeling of gratitude when I recall how a story touched them and made a difference, even if only for a few moments.

I'd like to encourage storytellers interested in telling stories to people struggling with the memory loss related to dementia and Alzheimer's disease to seriously consider serving this remarkable audience. You will be enriched in ways never imagined and you will never regret helping people experience the delight and magic of storytelling.



Glenda Bonin has been working as a professional storyteller since 1996, and currently specializes in providing programs for senior living communities and assisted living/memory care residents. She loves her job and greatly appreciates the power and wisdom of stories found in cultures from around the world.

As a touring artist, Glenda has told stories at many different venues for audiences of all ages. She has performed for tiny tots and family groups in libraries, K-8 students, large high school assemblies, workshops for college classes, family celebrations, and has provided program for youth-at-risk and special needs groups. Glenda's experience also includes public concerts, conferences, festivals, and dude ranches. For five years, she coordinated the Storytelling Tent for the Tucson Festival of Books.

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