

Art and memory 'collide' at Mattatuck Museum's Alzheimer's therapy program

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Michael Quirk (right) and his wife and caregiver Patty (left) work on collages as part of an art therapy program for people with early-stage Alzheimer's and their caregivers at The Mattatuck Museum in Waterbury on July 16, 2025.

Patty Quirk and her husband, Mike, looked at each other's collages, offering od-humored critique. The couple from Shelton, Connecticut, bantered ar

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laughed while looking at tiny squares of colored paper each arranged on paper.

Mike, 68, has early-stage Alzheimer's disease. Patty, 64, is his caregiver. He's a graphic designer and painter, and she's a school secretary. Both recently made art at the Mattatuck Museum in Waterbury as part of a free monthly program, "[Collide Art and Memory](#)," offered by the Connecticut Chapter of the Alzheimer's Association.

"My blood pressure's going down, just to be able to focus on this," she said, as she glued on another piece.

"I guess it's a date. It's being with people that we like and doing things that we enjoy, I think it's helpful to both of us," she said. "[It] helps to calm it down and not have so many mood swings [that I have]. It's a kind of depression and anxious, anxious times when I worry about things."

It's one of the ways Patty navigates her emotions surrounding Mike's diagnosis.

"At first, I thought he's just way too young to have something like this," Patty said, recalling Mike's Alzheimer's diagnosis about a year ago. "So that was tough. It was tough to say, 'well, you know, things aren't going to be quite the way we thought they would be for our future.'"

Contemplating the future can be a bit much for anybody. But for a caregiver to a loved one with a progressive disease that has no cure, it can be daunting.

"[I've been doing] just a lot of reading, a lot of trying to find out more about this," Patty said.

That research led to treatments at the [Dorothy Adler Center](#) at the Yale School of Medicine and to the art therapy program in Waterbury, where the couple comes every month to view and make art, and be with a community.

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CREDIT: Tyler Russell / Connecticut Public

David Scott Gilbert (left) and his sister and caregiver Nan Green (right) participate in an art therapy program for people with early-stage Alzheimer's and their caregivers at The Mattatuck Museum in Waterbury on July 16, 2025.

"As a teacher, I think of this as a field trip," said Holly Batti of the Alzheimer's Association, Connecticut Chapter, and the early stage social engagement facilitator for the Mattatuck Museum program. "[The program offers] education, social engagement, creativity and fun. We meet together, we introduce ourselves, it's usually the same group of people, and then we go upstairs to a gallery."

There, a docent offers participants a tour of the exhibit, and talks about the artist and the style, ranging from photography and quilting to oil painting.

Participants reflect on the feelings evoked before moving into a classroom where they make art in the style of the works just viewed. "There's no right or wrong answer, and you don't have to be an artist to be here in our group," Batti said.

Art as a pathway to memory, and meaning

Neuropsychiatric symptoms in Alzheimer's disease can include depression, loss of interest in activities, social withdrawal, mood swings, anger or aggression, changes in sleeping habits, wandering, loss of inhibitions, and delusions, [according to the Mayo Clinic](#).

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Art therapy can benefit both patients and caregivers, said Dr. Neha Jain, a geriatric psychiatrist and director of the Mood and Anxiety Clinic at UConn Health.

“The creative aspect of art therapy, whether it’s passive art appreciation or active art creation, can help in improving mood, engagement, and communication between patient and caregivers,” Jain said. “Art can also become a way for patients to reconcile former memories and skills, improve overall quality of life and provide a sense of meaning.”

Research [indicates](#) art therapy can engage attention, while providing pleasure and improving neuropsychiatric symptoms alongside social behavior, and self-esteem.

A heavy book



CREDIT: Tyler Russell / Connecticut Public

David Scott Gilbert (left) and his sister and caregiver Nan Green (right) show off a book they created together of David's artistic work throughout his life. Participants in an art therapy program for people with early-stage Alzheimer's and their caregivers at The Mattatuck Museum in Waterbury on July 16, 2025.

Nan Green of Rocky Hill also made art at Mattatuck Museum with her brother David Scott Gilbert, 74, of Glastonbury.

Green is one of Gilbert's caregivers, taking him to infusion therapy. The siblings make art together – Gilbert is an artist.

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"We're at my house about once a week, and I just get out cardstock," Green said. "I have a box of 100 different markers, and to encourage Dave to be artistic, I suffer through making my own little doodles, and we kind of parallel play."

In the gallery filled with art made by the participants, Green pointed to a huge collage they all created together for the Alzheimer's Association, Connecticut Chapter. Her 4-year-old grandson Wes also took part in the intergenerational art piece, with his distinctly dark swatches of brushstrokes.

Green pulls out a large book of memories that she helped put together for Gilbert, when the day comes that he no longer remembers. Pointing to a piece they worked on together, she said, "I do love ... picking out things that he's already partially put together. And then we finish them up together so that we can frame them."

The book is filled with photographs that Gilbert took during his travels, its pages brimming with bright collages, sketches and a portrait of his grandson.

It's a heavy book in many ways – one day, Gilbert might look at it with the eyes of an appreciative stranger.

But for now, his sister keeps it light.

"All fun, all fun," Gilbert said, smiling in mock horror as his sister teased him and play-poked him with her walking stick.

Learn more

"COLLIDE ART AND MEMORY A Memories @ The MATT Exhibition" is on view [at the Mattatuck Museum in Waterbury through Aug. 24.](#)

Connecticut Public's Robyn Doyon-Aitken contributed to this story.

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