



Lee Strawbridge (left) and Larry Oleksa (right) during the Warhol's celebrity-theme tour.

# TAKE A MOMENT

A BREATHER FROM ALZHEIMER'S,  
ONE PAINTING AT A TIME.

BY REID R. FRAZIER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARTHA RIAL

**I**t wasn't the best way for Larry and Stephanie Oleksa to start their visit. The couple was celebrating their 31st anniversary on a tour of the Andy Warhol Museum—a tour designed especially for Alzheimer's patients and their caregivers. Larry was diagnosed four years ago, and since then the number of activities he and Stephanie do together has dwindled. They still go to Steelers games, but he sometimes has trouble following the score.

The theme of this tour was “celebrity.” As Warhol educator Joan McGarry lectured to the Oleksas and another couple, Larry Oleksa suddenly put his hands on his knees. Then he collapsed on the museum floor in a sweaty heap.

He quickly revived and sat up. Someone got him a cup of orange juice. Stephanie held an ice pack on his neck. He was fine, apparently, just overheated. A few minutes later, paramedics checked his pulse and blood pressure and asked the 60-year-old man in jeans and a green polo shirt whether he wanted to stay on the tour. He nodded “Yes” and was soon off looking at Warhol's Marilyn Monroe portraits.

The Oleksas' day out was courtesy of the University of Pittsburgh's Alzheimer Disease Research Center and the Warhol. The collaboration gives patients and those who take care of them a break from the disease by taking them to see and make art.

“We wanted to give our patients an opportunity to have this interaction that's just positive, where they're not thinking of Alzheimer's or memory loss,” says Jennifer Lingler, director of education for the ADRC and assistant professor of health and community systems and of psychiatry. Last year, participants made studio visits with a resident artist whose work focused on memory. On the docket this year are visits to the Carnegie Museum of Art. The idea is based on other “art and Alzheimer's” projects around the country, including “Meet Me at MoMA,” which brings patients to the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

“You're in an environment where there is no right, there is no wrong,” Lingler says. “You're looking at a piece of art; there's no answer key about what's the right thing to say about the piece of art you're examining.”

Studies suggest activities like exercise and cognitive stimulation, such as creative expression, may slow the onset of dementia. But

these indications are gleaned from large epidemiological studies. For obvious reasons, there are no rodent models that can show the effect of artistic expression on the onset of dementia.

Lingler, who helped design the program, says the visits aren't intended to be therapeutic. Instead, they're a way to offset some of the damage Alzheimer's causes to the social lives of those in its grip. Couples living with Alzheimer's might not get invited to as many social events as in the past. And they may be more likely to decline invitations they do receive. Patients can feel ashamed over not being able to remember a friend's name and might want to avoid embarrassing themselves in public.

“Sometimes it's difficult to find things to go to,” says Stephanie Oleksa. “It's too difficult to take him to a show—that wouldn't hold his interest. I took him to the Rockettes, and he enjoyed that. But that wasn't something he had to follow, like a play.”

As much as the program may do for the patient, it might be just as important to the caregiver, Lingler says. There is mounting evidence that the stress of caring for a loved one with dementia can actually take years off a person's life. Caregivers have high levels of anxiety and depression. They don't go out as much, and they don't take care of their own health.

“You're in a situation where day in and day out you're exposed to someone who's suffering, and there's little you can do about it,” says Richard Schulz, professor of psychiatry and director of the University's Center for Social and Urban Research. Schulz has shown that caregivers had lower life expectancies and higher rates of cardiovascular illness than their noncaregiving counterparts. (One of his postdoctoral fellows, Joan Monin, now an assistant professor of epidemiology at Yale University, showed that heart rates and blood pressures increased among caregivers when they saw a loved one suffer; their reactions were not as marked when witnessing a stranger suffering.)

Any step to improve a caregiver's mental state, Lingler says, is potentially worthwhile.

“If the person has a positive experience during that time, even if it's fleeting, then we've done something positive,” Lingler says. “Because it really is a disease where people live moment by moment.”

During his first moments at the museum,

Larry Oleksa sat in stony silence as his small group gazed at portraits of Judy Garland, Dolly Parton, and Sylvester Stallone. Then, when the group gathered in the museum's basement studios, McGarry opened a box of hats and props. They were going to take “celebrity” portraits, she said. When McGarry asked the visitors to come up and get their costumes, Larry sprang out of his chair and was the first to grab a hat. He chose a black fedora with a white band, à la '30s-era gangster. Stephanie chose a pillbox hat and pink feather boa. A few minutes later, they were getting their picture taken in front of a digitized backdrop of *The Wizard of Oz*. Then they rolled ink on a few screen prints.

This was the Oleksas' second trip to the Warhol. On the first, Larry had gone through the tour, like this one, in near-total silence. But it didn't take Stephanie long to make reservations for their next visit.

On the drive back home to Munhall after that tour, Larry turned to Stephanie. “He said, ‘That was good.’” Stephanie recalls. “I said, ‘Do you want to go again?’ He said, ‘Yeah.’ I called the next day.” ■



**TOP:** Larry and Stephanie Oleksa view Warhol's Marilyn prints; Donna Strawbridge (far left) sits next to Stephanie. **BOTTOM:** Lee and Donna Strawbridge pose for the paparazzi.