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Waltham Against Dementia  
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Alzheimer's disease is a degenerative illness that currently has no treatments, prevention or cures. According to the latest facts and figures released by the Alzheimer's Association, it is the sixth leading cause of death in the U.S. and is one-hundred percent fatal. By 2050, it is estimated that nearly fourteen million Americans will be living with Alzheimer's disease and will cost the nation over a trillion dollars. Currently, over sixteen million caregivers are providing unpaid care valued over two billion dollars.

Caregivers, arguably, bear the biggest brunt of the disease, and elderly care in general. The rates of depression are higher in caregivers than in patients. In a way, caregivers are brought into the illness experience as well. However, according to a 2012 commissioned review by the National Alzheimer's Project Act, by bolstering psychosocial and environmental interventions, caregiving is fostered to have more positive outcomes for both patients and their caregivers.

With a rapidly aging demographic in the United States, it is imperative that youth involvement with this population increases to better health outcomes for the elderly. Today's youth are tomorrow's healthcare professionals and caretakers. By cultivating sensitivity and interaction at an early age, our young population will be better equipped to treat and care for our vulnerable populations.

I hoped to use the Rich Collins Community Impact and Leadership Fellowship to raise youth involvement with Alzheimer's disease, build intergenerational bridges with Waltham community youth and residents at Leland home, and increase overall community awareness on Alzheimer's disease and elderly care.

This project aimed to provide a multi-tiered approach to furthering the goals outlined above. The project had four parts that would start a youth volunteer program at Leland Nursing in Waltham. Ten volunteers were recruited from Brandeis University. The first step in implementation was for volunteers to undergo a rigorous training program led by both community partners and myself.

Beth Soltzberg from Jewish Family and Children's Services in Waltham conducts Dementia Friends Champions' training all over Massachusetts. Dementia Friends Massachusetts is part of a larger global movement and helps people understand what Dementia is, what it is like living with Dementia, and how to better support a person living with Dementia. In Beth's words, "you will learn five key messages about dementia and a bit about what it's like to live with dementia. As a

Dementia Friend, you turn your new understanding of dementia into a practical action that can help someone with dementia living in your community. Your action can be as big or as small as you choose – because every action counts!” A large portion of the volunteer training was for volunteers themselves to become Dementia Friend Champions. The latter portion included an orientation to Leland Home led by activities coordinator, Candy Bouris, with an emphasis placed on the populations’ specific needs, special cases, and ideas for how to best serve them.

A second part of implementation included a requirement to become a Dementia Friends Champion: to host an information session of your own. New champions are encouraged to host sessions in front of family members or even a friend or two. This requirement of the training serves as a ripple effect and will undoubtedly increase direct youth involvement with Dementia Friends and also increase overall community awareness on Alzheimer’s or Dementia.

I strongly believe that Brandeis can personally benefit from this one session alone. Brandeis students can take the knowledge that they learn from this training and apply it to other opportunities on campus. There are multiple opportunities available that work with a Dementia or elderly population such as the Youth Movement Against Alzheimer’s, Companions to Elders, volunteer opportunities at Memory Cafe, and the annual Walk to End Alzheimer’s. Additionally, Brandeis is one of the top recipients of research grants from the Alzheimer’s Association. Those interested in scientific or public health research can absolutely benefit from a Dementia Friends training.

After volunteers had undergone training, they were scheduled to begin volunteering twice a month at Leland beginning in March. The primary responsibilities of volunteers were to implement sustainable activities that will bolster the current activities at Leland and help relieve staff members. Activities funded by the fellowship included starting a community garden at Leland, art activities, and curating personal playlists for residents at Leland. This project outline had been developed following discussions with our community partners and also the practice recommendations outlined in *Alzheimer’s Association Dementia Care Practice Recommendations*. Briefly, the recommendations outlined in this article call for a more person-centered approach to care-giving, identifying opportunities for meaningful engagement, creating and maintaining a supportive care environment for pts and caregivers and building culturally sensitive programs that are adaptable to diverse populations. These activities will directly engage the volunteers with residents which is extremely beneficial for both parties and accomplish care recommendations. After speaking with Candy Bouris, the current director of activities and volunteering, it is clear how beneficial this program would have been for Leland.

Just as volunteering was set to be in full swing, the COVID-19 pandemic began to hit. The university shut down all in-person volunteer activities and Leland Home closed itself to outside

visitors. The population we would have been working with were an extremely at-risk group and no one felt comfortable with potentially exposing the group with in-person activities. However, the volunteers and I were able to spend one Saturday afternoon with the residents of Leland Home before it became an extreme health risk.

Though this project was cut short, it was clear to me after one afternoon how beneficial this program would have been both to the residents of Leland Home and the Brandeis volunteers. The afternoon spent at Leland Home was one filled with board games, strangers getting to know each other, conversation, and vital social interaction for the population we were working with. While this impact is not measurable in any qualitative way, it is clear that Leland Home welcomed our group and that the volunteers genuinely enjoyed taking time out of their Saturday to visit the residents.

In my application for the fellowship, I had stated that receiving this fellowship would give me the opportunity to become more outspoken and a champion of elderly rights both on campus and in the Waltham community. Even through my shortened project, I see how I have gained an agency to speak on elderly rights, especially in front of a crowd. I feel more confident in my ability to serve the Waltham community in my future career after Brandeis because I gained an opportunity to learn and interact with the people I want to serve.

Though my goals changed throughout the project, especially due to unprecedented situations, I am confident that this project accomplished my community impact goals to some extent and was an excellent use of the Rich/Collins Community Impact and Leadership Fellowship.