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he name says it all: Caring Days. Clients who come here are wrapped in the warm glow of the dedicated staff under the leadership of executive director, Vicki Kerr. On a recent walk through the building, Kerr greeted clients by name with a friendly hello or a pat on the arm. “We are family here,” she explained.

Caring Days is a nonmedical day facility for adults with memory disorders caused by Alzheimer’s disease, Parkinson’s, stroke, Huntington’s, trauma, alcoholism, and Pick’s disease. “I like to refer to us as a quality of life facility,” Kerr said. “We are a social setting daycare.”

Twenty years ago members of First Presbyterian Church recognized the need for day care for adults experiencing memory loss. The church banded together with several other like-minded congregations to form Caring Congregations and the first Caring Days Adult Day Care opened in 1997.

Susan Davis, who was a Tuscaloosa City School special education coordinator along with Kerr, was helping to develop the program for First Presbyterian. “The more she worked on it the more she said it sounded like something that I would do,” Kerr said of Davis. “So I visited a program in Birmingham that was similar.” Kerr retired from the school system and took on the challenge of her lifetime.

“I had supervised people; I had written grants and programs but I had never been around any Alzheimer’s patients,” Kerr said. “But I love it. I look back now and I think I was meant to do this. That [teaching] was a kind of preparation for me to move forward. It feels good to know you are going to leave this earth better than you found it.”

Two years ago Caring Days opened in its new facility, the Mal and Charlotte Moore Center, named in honor of the former University of Alabama athletics director and his wife. Mal Moore was the honorary chair and helped with the capital fundraising. “His wife had Alzheimer’s and Mal was a caregiver for 19 years,” Kerr said. “I was particular about everything in the building,



Art Enhances



The Mal and Charlotte Moore Center, home of Caring Days

Quality of Life

by Margaret Clevenger



One of two mosaics created by artists Rhys Greene and Linda Muñoz

“To me the most important thing, every single day, is that everybody here is laughing and smiling.” -Vicki Kerr, Director

and I felt the same about the name.”

The new building is quite a step up in size at 11,000 square feet, more than four times the square footage of the old site. “People kept telling me I couldn’t do it,” Kerr said of the new facility. “It took 2 ½ years to raise the money and another ten months to build the building.” Kerr was on site every day and the hard hat she wore, signed by the construction workers, sits on her desk today, a visible reminder that with hard work dreams can come true.

On many of those construction days, Kerr brought along a tool of her own; a magic marker to place her own style of time capsule in the building. Inside the walls, before the sheetrock was hung, she wrote the names of all her former clients and their caregivers. Many people often come to Kerr now with regrets that their mother or father was not still around to be a part of the new facility. “And I always say ‘Your mother is here and so are you.’ Because that’s our family and I think it makes

a difference to them that they are all considered a part of us.”

Kerr said she did not want anything in the new building to look institutional. And it doesn’t. The rooms are airy and bright and much of the furniture is teak. Art is a constant in every part of the facility from the restrooms to the two courtyards.

Kerr’s interest in art is immediately evident by the large mosaic set into the outside wall next to the covered side entrance where clients enter. She commissioned artists Rhys Greene and Linda Muñoz, with consultant Suzanne Gray, to create the mosaic after she saw a similar piece the artists had done for the Kentuck headquarters in Northport.

“Vicki wanted a happy, positive piece,” said Rhys Greene. “Definitely a sunrise, not a sunset.” The tree and sun mosaic is bordered by a collection of bits of china, small toys, and other favorite items contributed by the clients of Caring Days and their families. “It creates a sense of ownership,” Greene said.

The large mosaic is comprised of smaller panels that were joined after they were attached to the brick wall. Greene and Muñoz worked on the panels in their individual studios before bringing them to Caring Days.

“We left large areas where the panels would be joined,” Greene said. “That allowed us to place the small mosaic pieces so that the seams would not be evident in the finished piece. We stood on scaffolding to do the grouting and that was really a challenge and a lot of fun.”

Greene and Muñoz also created a mosaic fireplace surround for the fireplace in the large meeting room inside the facility. The artists used client art as inspiration.

Caring Days started offering art classes to their clients many years ago with surprising results. “None of the people here had actually painted before and all of a sudden they were turning out this beautiful artwork,”

Kerr said. "So we kept on with the art program and we started making them cards with their art on it." Throughout the building Kerr has hung framed, enlarged watercolors painted by the clients.

"The art is so important here," Kerr said. "Their bright and beautiful artwork is everywhere and the families are so proud of it."

Diana Hannah has been teaching art at Caring Days for eight years. "Art class is one hour," Hannah said. "Sometimes we draw a picture and then the clients will use watercolors to fill it in. Other times I'll put a vase of flowers on a table and they'll draw that. We try to change it up so people can experience different things."

A few years ago, Dr. Daniel Potts, an Alabama neurologist, put together a book featuring the artwork of his father, Lester Potts, who began painting watercolors after he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. "Danny started writing poetry to go along with his father's artwork and published a book, which is really neat," Kerr said. Proceeds from the sale of *The Broken Jar* go to support the programs at Caring Days.

There are no regulations in Alabama governing adult day care and Kerr wondered how her facility would stack up against other programs. She signed up to be evaluated by the Alzheimer's Foundation of America, based in New York. The Foundation uses 39 pages of standards to evaluate nursing homes, assisted living facilities, and adult day cares.

"I signed up to do it," Kerr said, "because I wanted to know if there were things we were missing or information we needed to have. They came down in July and evaluated the program and we are now an Excellence in Care Dementia Program of Distinction. We are one of 44 in the country and the only one in Alabama."

Kerr credits the people of Tuscaloosa and surrounding areas with the successful program. "This is totally

a community program; the community started it, supported it, helped us build our building," she said.

Clients spend a full day, from 7:30 A.M. until 5:30 P.M., at Caring Days for a fee of just \$45. Lunch and snacks are included. A partial day of six hours is also available. Costs are kept low through donations and fundraising.

The atmosphere here is upbeat and cheerful whether the clients are painting watercolors, putting together puzzles, working on crafts, or participating in a round of Bingo.

"I can see and hear everything from my office and there is nothing that makes me happier than to hear them back there doing belly chuckles," Kerr said. "To me the most important thing, every single day, is that everybody here is laughing and smiling." ■

Margaret Clevenger's work has appeared in many newspapers and magazines including Alabama Heritage, Mississippi Magazine, Pennsylvania Magazine, and Southern Lady. She has a story, "Whistling Past the Graveyard" in the anthology Tuscaloosa Tales: Stories of Tuscaloosa and its People. She is a regular contributor to Jubilation.



Caring Days

is located at

943 31st Street East,
Tuscaloosa.

For more information call
(205)752-6840 or go to
www.caringdays.org
(across from Ridgecrest
Baptist Church)

Hours:

7:30 a.m. until 5:30 p.m.
Days: Monday - Friday

Cost:

\$45 per full day
(up to ten hours)
\$30 for a 6 hour day

