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A publication of

LifePath

options for independence

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THE GOOD LIFE

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Finding Joy on the Way to Goodbye

By Gary Yuhas,
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Gary Yuhas

There is something quietly miraculous that happens when someone living with memory loss sits in a circle with others, hears a familiar song, and begins to sing along. The worry in their eyes softens. Their bodies relax. For a little

while, they are simply present, surrounded by others, in a safe and comforting environment.

That is what *Joyful Expressions!* has given us. And on Monday, June 8, we invite you to witness it.

Joyful Expressions! is a series of creative arts sessions that LifePath has been bringing to older adults across Franklin County — at Elm Terrace in Greenfield, Highland Village in Shelburne, and Sanderson Place in Sunderland, as well as at LifePath's own Community Engagement Center (CEC) here in Greenfield. Made possible in part through a grant from Mass Cultural Council, the program pairs two extraordinary local artists with participants who might never have called themselves artists or singers. Choral director Joe Toritto leads the group in song, and artist Debra Cootware guides participants through hands-on art sessions that require nothing more than curiosity and a willingness to create. What emerges from the participants is an acknowledgement that individuals who are sometimes forgotten about still have much to give, and much to teach us; about themselves, and about ourselves.

The June 8 event will be the culmination of the *Joyful Expressions!* series and a celebration of what these participants have made together. The *Joyful Expressions! and Community Sing* takes place on Monday, June 8, from 3:00 to 4:30 p.m. at the Greenfield Corporate Center, North Entrance, 101 Munson Street, Greenfield (Ground-Level Conference Area). The event is free and open to all. Guests are invited to browse the multi-media artwork created by program participants and to lend their own voices to a community chorus led by Joe Toritto. Ice cream and snacks will be provided. Those with special accessibility needs are welcome to contact Sara Levy in advance at (413) 829-9190.

The event will also be, for many of us, a bittersweet one. Later this month, LifePath's Community Engagement Center will close its doors. The CEC has served as a lifeline for individuals living with memory loss and the family members and loved ones who care for them. Participants come from across Franklin County knowing that while they are here, they are safe, seen, and surrounded by others who understand what they are going through. Caregivers, including spouses, adult children, and siblings, get several hours of genuine respite, the kind that is hard to come by and harder still to ask for.

I have previously written about the CEC and the people it serves. I have shared the stories of caregivers who told us they didn't know how isolated they had become until someone said it out loud. We have heard from participants' families that their loved

ones count the days to the next program, that there is more laughter at home, less tension, and more openness. This program fills a role that no other organization in our region currently provides. It is, to put it plainly, the only one of its kind in the area.

And yet, we cannot sustain it. Despite a \$125,000 grant from the Alzheimer's Association Center for Dementia Respite Innovation, we have not been able to close the remaining funding gap. We have explored every avenue and have hoped for good news that hasn't come. And so, with deep regret and enormous gratitude for everyone who made the CEC what it became, we are forced to say goodbye.

This closure does not happen in a vacuum. LifePath, like so many human services organizations across the Commonwealth and the country, is navigating an extraordinarily difficult funding landscape. State budget pressures have been mounting for some time, and the turbulence at the federal level, including uncertainty around the Older Americans Act, proposed cuts and the addition of work requirements to Medicaid, and reductions to community and human services funding, casts a dark cloud over organizations like ours. We are doing our best to protect the services that remain, while being honest with ourselves and with you about what is at stake.

What gives us hope, as it always does, is this community. The connections formed inside the CEC do not end when the program does. The caregivers who found one another here, who formed what one of them beautifully described as their own "micro-support community," will carry those bonds forward. The participants who discovered, perhaps for the first time, that they could paint something abstract and surprising and wholly their own, will carry that too. These are the things that cannot be defunded.

But programs like the CEC, and events like *Joyful Expressions!*, do not happen without ongoing support. If you have been moved by what LifePath does in this community, we ask you to consider what you can offer. Financial contributions, at any level, help us continue the work that remains and, we hope, bring back the work we have had to set aside. If giving money isn't possible, consider giving time — LifePath's volunteer corps is the backbone of many of our programs, and there are meaningful opportunities for people with all kinds of talents and schedules. LifePath supports the community and is powered by the community.

And if you have a talent — as a musician, an artist, a facilitator, a connector — we would genuinely love to hear from you. Programs like *Joyful Expressions!* are built on the principles that older adults and those living with dementia deserve not only dignity and respect, but also beauty, creativity, and joy; not just care.

Come join us on June 8 to hear singing, to see art, and to applaud the people who showed up for one another, week after week, and made something worth celebrating.

To learn more about supporting LifePath's mission through a gift, through volunteering, or through sharing your talents, visit lifepathma.org or call 413-773-5555.

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