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JACOB LANGSTON/ORLANDO SENTINEL

Dawn Kelly (right) helps a patient during a recent poetry session at Day Break at Winter Park.

Alzheimer's research

Poetry readings captivate patients

By **Kate Santich** | ORLANDO SENTINEL

As audiences go, Alzheimer's patients are a tough group. Some stare into space or drift off to sleep. Others have trouble sitting still — and tend to get up and wander off if they're bored. Many forget why they came or who is performing. So the notion of capturing their attention with a poetry reading might seem absurd.

But in a handful of adult day-care programs and memory clinics in Central Florida, poetry readings have not only become a big hit, but the focus of a research project to measure what, if any, lasting impact the poetry provokes.

"To say that it is an amazing experience won't do it justice," says Melixa Carbonell, a board member and volunteer with Easter Seals Florida,

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one of four local nonprofit agencies involved in the research.

The Alzheimer's Poetry Project, founded by New York poet Gary Glazner, is not built on the traditional, stand-at-the-podium-and-read poetry recital.

Rather, it uses the simple rhymes typically learned in childhood or whimsical works created on the spot with audience participation. The facilitator moves among the seniors, holding their hands, touching their shoulders, gently prodding them to share their thoughts, reawakening long-ago memories.

"There was a guy in [one] group, his head was down, he wasn't participating, and I said the Longfellow poem, 'I shot an arrow in the air ...'" Glazner says, recalling the initial workshop that spawned the project. "And his eyes suddenly popped open, and he said, 'It fell to earth, I know not where.' In that instant, he was back with us and was able to participate. It was very powerful."

Since 2004, Glazner has taught the poetry-project techniques to more than 800 health-care workers and family caregivers across the country, and it is endorsed by the National Endowment for the Arts. But until now, the research has been limited to immediate impact.

Studies show, for instance, that listening to poetry can lower heart rate and other indicators of stress, and that using words in new and creative ways sparks dramatic reactions in the brain's pathways.

But watch a session of the Alzheimer's Poetry Project, which began last month in Central Florida, and you won't need a scientist to tell you that art can transform mood and behavior.

Once-somber faces light up with recognition, heads nod, hands clap, listeners giggle and laugh. A palpable energy and connection builds from a room of strangers often lost in their own thoughts. Glazner, leading a session in Winter Park last week, is especially charismatic in drawing out participants, sometimes squeezing their hands in his to accentuate the cadence of a rhyme.

"I think he's just adorable," gushes 92-year-old Mo Kobzan, an Easter Seals adult day-care client. "I actually didn't know what I was doing, and I was so surprised when anything came out of my mouth."

Kobzan, like many in the audience, labors to find the words she wants and has trouble focusing. But she brightened during the hour-long session with Glazner and had no trouble remembering that he had visited before, though it had been nearly a month.

"He's careful not to embarrass anyone," says

Nancy Squillacioti, executive director of Orlando's Alzheimer Resource Center, another agency involved in the research. "And he's particularly careful not to treat the patients like children."

The center — along with Easter Seals, the Brain Fitness Club of Winter Park and St. Mary Magdalen's adult day-care program in Altamonte Springs — is monitoring the ongoing behavior of patients exposed to the poetry project and taking notes. The data will be compiled later this year and perhaps published as part of a scientific journal.

Two local charitable foundations — Edyth Bush and The Pabst Charitable Foundation for the Arts — pitched in nearly \$10,000 to cover the expenses.

In some ways, Glazner and others say, it doesn't matter what the research shows — at least, not for people like Kobzan or their caregivers, who often struggle to find activities that will bring so much as a smile.

"If you could ever show that you could reduce people's medications, for instance, by doing this type of activity, that would be huge," Glazner says. "But really, for them, they don't care. All they care about is: Are they laughing, are they having fun, is someone paying attention to them? That's what's important."

Kate Santich can be reached at 407-420-5503 or ksantich@orlando-sentinel.com.



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Poet Gary Glazner dances at a recent session as part of the Alzheimer's Poetry Project.

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