



Dementia unit lit up with love

A sense of sadness is unavoidable when visiting the dementia unit at Ron Smith Care Centre, but felt just as strongly is the immense love with which the patients are surrounded.

Set in the tranquil gardens of Rand Aid Association's Elphin Lodge in Lyndhurst, the care centre offers quality care for frail senior citizens. Off a wide passage, a sunlit-room is filled each week day morning with a circle of people not only in need of frail care, but a little extra stimulation and love too. These are the people who have found a place of safety in the care centre's dementia unit.

And adding that little something extra is a band of volunteers who give of their time once a week to 'bring the spark to the eyes' of the unit's residents.

"I come in and their heads are hanging, eyes staring. Within minutes of engaging their attention, I see them smile. Their faces light up," says Helga Bultemeier. A resident of Thornhill Manor, a nearby Rand Aid Association retirement village, she brings along her little dog, nicknamed 'Dr Pippi' whose job it is to draw out the patients even more, as they stretch out hands to stroke and pet, or simply follow his every move.

Joining Helga each Wednesday is Patsy Vermaak, also of Thornhill, and art therapist Yehudit Lurie. Both Helga and Patsy, along with those who make up the teams that work with the patients on the other week days, responded to calls for volunteers to spend two hours a week interacting with the people of the dementia unit.

They underwent a course presented by renowned occupational therapist Sylvia Birkhead and although initially overwhelmed by emotion, now look forward to their time at the care centre, where they play ball, sing, cut, colour or simply hold the hand of the dementia unit patients.

The care centre's in-house occupational therapist, Charlene Richards, lays a gentle hand on a wheelchair-bound man's shoulder, as she relays that the volunteers often tell her they get 'more back than the residents do'.

The room is made bright with the props used to stimulate the residents, many of which were cleverly created by Maureen Vermeulen, Rand Aid's former senior matron, who is now retired. She has made aprons with various sensory objects attached to the inside of a wide pocket, to give direction to many of the residents' repetitive fiddling, as well as a variety of other goodies to engage the senses.

Handing out biscuits and helping patients sip tea where needed, Helga says, "There are some darlings here; I cannot wait to see them each Wednesday."

If you are able to assist with educational toys, please contact Charlene at 011 882 6296.

