

AGI provides services for those with Alzheimer's, caregivers

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For the last 10 years, Glen Graves has watched his wife descend into Alzheimer's disease.

As her primary caregiver, he has for the past several years come to rely on the services of the non-profit Alzheimer Groupe (AGI) Inc. Twice a week he takes his wife to AGI's Côte St. Luc premises, so that she can participate in the many activities that take place there.

Alone in the care of his wife, with grown children living out of town, Graves himself has also come to rely on the group's support services. He participates in the caregiver's support and training groups, as well as just taking a well-deserved break for a cup of coffee and conversation with other caregivers and Alzheimer Groupe staff. He feels he is not alone.

The Alzheimer Society of Canada predicts that the number of Canadians living with Alzheimer's or dementia is expected to swell to epidemic proportions within a gener-



Volunteer Lois Manton displays tactile objects, many she developed herself, that are used to stimulate Alzheimer's disease sufferers. [Anita Szabadi-Gottesman photos]

ation. Presently, there are approximately half a million Canadians living with Alzheimer's, including 119,700 Quebecers. Forecasted numbers point to between one million and 1.3 million people affected with the disease within the next 25 years. Budgets are tight and resources scarce, so the problem of how to effectively provide services for the increasing numbers of sufferers and their families is ongoing.

Fourteen years ago, Risa Scherzer, now co-president of AGI, started a support group to ease her through the caregiving responsibilities of looking after her mother who was suffering from Alzheimer's. At that time, the disease was rarely addressed and caregivers were not a

concern. The founders of AGI felt that there was a great need for support and education as soon as a family member is diagnosed.

Today, Scherzer and the other co-president of AGI, Debi Brownstein, have seen the group grow in numbers and services, which has necessitated a recent move to a spacious, bright premises in a building located at 5555 Westminster Ave. and Cote-St-Luc Road. From Monday through Friday, the premises is a hive of activity.

"The new activity centre has been designed with specific goals in mind," says Marva Whyte, AGI's director of support services.

"Careful attention has been paid to lighting, type of flooring, colour

choices and the inclusion of an adapted bathroom. All these factors can impact a person suffering from Alzheimer's disease."

AGI's mission is to provide services to individuals with Alzheimer's and other related dementia; provide support for their caregivers; and educate and inform the general community about issues related to dementia care. Services include individual counselling and support groups for spouses, adult children and those in the early stages of diagnosis.

Respite services include daily activity programs, art therapy workshops and educational programs for caregivers, as well as training for health-care workers. Participants are encour-

aged to take part in light exercise classes. Community outreach is also emphasized, including workshops and lectures for students. Speakers are available for synagogues, seniors and community groups.

AGI is staffed by a group of professionals, headed by Whyte, and includes social workers, an art therapist and several recreologists. The organization maintains a high staff to participant ratio, with at least one for three participants. Whyte points out that many programs are individually tailored to the needs of each client. "We want to help everyone we can," she says.

Volunteers are welcome at the centre and play an integral role there. "Ninety per cent of our volunteers have had some involvement with Alzheimer's disease," says Scherzer "They want to see our services continually expand and show people that they are not alone. We cry together, but we laugh a lot, too."

As an independent, non-profit organization, AGI relies on donations to keep the organization moving forward. Most activities are offered free or for a nominal charge.

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One day Alzheimer disease will be just a memory.