

Memory & Company:

A 'private health club/social club/spa' for people with memory loss



Owner/director Ashley Kwong has turned the concept of adult day care on its head in Canada

by Marilyn Larkin, MA

Ashley Kwong's first experience with people with dementia came at age 17, as part of an internship in high school. "I saw a lot of poor treatment and decided this was an area that needed more time and attention," Kwong says. "So I became a recreation therapist and immediately went to work in a long-term care facility. It was a cockroach-filled place," she recalls, "and everyone with dementia

was put on the top floor, with no air-conditioning and horrible food."

That was in the late 1990s, and Kwong felt powerless. "I was young," she states. "I came home crying and didn't know what to do; I felt if I reported the situation, nothing would happen."

Deciding to change the system from the inside, Kwong went back to school and received a bachelor's degree in gerontology, joined Sunrise Senior Living as a frontline caregiver, and worked her way

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*Memory & Company
members interacted with
several animals that visited
the Markham, Ontario,
venue in April 2016*



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An executive chef makes healthy, fresh meals for club members in the gourmet kitchen at Memory & Company in Markham, Ontario. Not only do members eat the wholesome food, but they can also watch 'Chef Chris' at work and help prepare the food

up to executive director of a Sunrise community. And while she appreciated that residents were well treated there, Kwong “saw how many burned-out family caregivers were coming in. They didn’t know what to do other than put their family members into a residence, because there were very few options out there.”

Kwong was convinced that people with memory loss were being institutionalized “really early—in many cases, before they needed to be—simply because family members had to return to work or find some balance in their lives,” she says. “Sometimes they just needed a few days off, but didn’t know how to do so properly.”

According to Kwong, “what families really needed was a nice place for their loved ones to go that didn’t involve institutionalizing them.” The result? Memory & Company, a Markham, Ontario-based

day program. Cofounded by Kwong and her husband Victor, the organization is a “private health club/social club/spa” for people with memory loss. Kwong serves as director of operations, Victor as director of innovation and technology.

In this interview for the *Journal on Active Aging*[®], Ashley Kwong shares her vision—a holistic approach to adult day care in an upscale environment where participants are valued and encouraged to socialize and stay active. She also reveals how she transformed that vision into reality.

ML: *Why the “private health club/social club/spa” concept?*

AK: Once I decided to open my own adult day program, I started touring sites to look at what was out there. I found that many traditional options weren’t places where I would want to spend the day. At the same time, I’d see the nice

retirement communities out there and think, Why aren’t we implementing a similar concept for people who want to spend the day, making it like a day club or a day spa? Why are people with memory loss getting such a poor deal? Why aren’t they getting the nice environment?

I knew from experience that people with memory loss recognize and understand when they’re in a welcoming place and receiving good treatment. I also knew that with the right approach to care, responsive behaviors decrease—wandering, aggression, repeating sentences over and over, and general restlessness, for example. And I thought that many of those behaviors could decrease even more in the right environment.

After a diagnosis, many people think their life is over. Yet you can have de-

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The Music Lounge provides a comfortable environment for music therapy and impromptu jam sessions between members and staff at Memory & Company, a 'health club for people with memory loss', in Markham, Ontario

mentia for 20 years or more and still have quality of life. We want people to come to us to make new friends, build relationships, remain active and become fit. Because mind and body work together, individuals get nutritious meals, as well.

Essentially, we want to give our members a place that anybody would enjoy, but one that's designed specifically for them, to enable them to have the best possible quality of life, regardless of diagnosis.

ML: *Can you give us more details about the space and the environment at Memory & Company?*

AK: Many assisted-living communities simply add a locked unit on an existing floor for their dementia clients. They don't take into consideration how people living with memory loss actually function in a space, which is quite different from the way somebody without memory loss functions.

At Memory & Company, we have a circular environment, meaning our members never reach a dead end. They can move around freely and safely without having to feel like they're confined to a specific space.

When I ran an assisted-living community, the residents would often stand by the elevator waiting for the doors to open, or they'd look at the fire exits at the end of the passage and try to exit that way. That doesn't happen in our space. We match curtains to the wall colors to cover exit doors. In fact, people without memory loss find it difficult to find our exit doors without looking at the exit sign on the ceiling.

In our setting, everyone just moves from one place to another. Because we have a large site—11,000 sq. ft.—and a variety of rooms, members can keep exploring the space. We have a beauty room, music lounge, library, theater, gym, dance studio and secured outdoor lounge, as well as a couple of rooms for napping.

We also have an open-concept gourmet kitchen. I always wondered why the kitchen is completely closed off in many day programs and retirement residences. At many of the parties I've gone to, people tend to end up in the kitchen—it's really a social hub in most cultures. So we have an executive chef on-site to prepare meals in front of our members, and people can either participate in making the meal or just enjoy the food. The sights and smells of food being prepared stimulate the appetite, which helps people who struggle with a lack of desire to eat. Our chef makes fresh juices, too, to encourage members to stay hydrated.

ML: *What kind of programming do you offer?*

AK: We offer pretty much everything from dance and exercise tailored to people's abilities, to gardening, hydrotherapy, art and music. Most things we do, like dress-up or scene day, involve one or two steps—we can't undertake a long-term project such as rehearsing a play to perform at a later day. When we spend a few days on art, for example, we know we'll need to remind our members about the projects they started.

In addition, members have opportunities to showcase their talents and engage with others. For example, one member who comes twice a week always brings his harmonica and plays for everyone. Another plays the piano. Sometimes they'll play together and also with our music therapist.

ML: *I understand you use technology, as well.*

AK: Technology is used throughout our space from the moment people walk through the door. Victor and I designed a customer-relations management app. We use it to check people in, keep a

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Partnering for progress against dementia

Memory & Company is open to partnering with research institutions and organizations that serve people with dementia. Following are two examples of such collaborations:

Lauren E. Sergio, PhD, Associate Professor, York University,

Toronto: Neuroscientist Lauren Sergio is committed to helping people preserve functional independence as long as possible. Her current work involves investigating how the brain controls movement. “Most people working in the field of aging are focusing on cognition,” Sergio says, “whereas we’re focusing on the way people behave and interact with their environment.”

Sergio looks at visuomotor skills—how different parts of the brain need to talk to each other in order to go from seeing an object to using it in a way that’s not as direct as, say, picking up a cup of tea. “It’s more about such skills as using a rearview mirror to back your car into a space, where you have to reverse what you’re seeing and doing—turning to the left to move the car to the right,” she explains.

The connections in the brain needed to accomplish such complex tasks are weakened in people at risk for dementia or in the early stages of the disease, Sergio notes. She and her colleagues have devised a video game that aims to strengthen those connections. That’s where Memory & Company members come in.

Members who agree to be in the 14-week pilot study use tablet computers and a mouse to play a game similar to *Fruit Ninja* (<http://fruitninja.com>), which requires them to use their mouse to zap pieces of fruit that fly around the tablet screen. The difference in Sergio’s study is the fruit flies around on a second screen—a monitor attached to the tablet.

The participant moves his or her finger in one place, on the tablet, and tries to get a result while looking at the monitor, a task that can be “quite challenging,” Sergio affirms. At higher levels, the tablet is flipped upside down. A participant must then move his or her hand to the right so the cursor goes left to hit the fruit. Sergio thinks the game might one day be used as a diagnostic screen or as a means of strengthening brain connections to help delay memory-loss progression.

Why did the researcher from York University partner with Memory & Company for the pilot? “The space is amazing and so is Ashley,” Sergio says. “She understands the need for a multi-modal approach for members, as well as the needs of family caregivers. Ashley thought the program would be a great opportunity, and members’ families were motivated, too, since some had spouses who used to care about computers but had lost interest. They see it as a way to help them reengage.”

Alzheimer Society of Toronto: The Alzheimer Society of Toronto spearheads Minds in Motion, an 8-week pro-

gram for people with dementia and their caregivers that focuses on active living, socialization and brain health. “In the first half of a Minds in Motion session, participants do some form of moderate exercise, such as seated yoga or line dancing,” says Cathy Barrick, the society’s chief executive officer. “In the second half, they break into small groups, sit around a table, have coffee, and either play a game or chat with each other. That’s the more social component,” she explains.

“Minds in Motion is a program we take on the road to various community organizations to reach people in the community,” Barrick continues. “We chose to add Memory & Company because it’s such an innovative program, designed with the client in mind. It’s a home-like environment, and the staff also spend lots of time supporting families.”

The society has worked with Memory & Company in different ways “from the [club’s] very beginning,” Barrick notes. “There’s nothing bad, per se, about typical day-center programming, but Memory & Company really has taken everything to the next level.”

While no additional programming is in the works with Memory & Company right now, “we’re always in communication, so if an opportunity arises for us to work together, I would jump at the chance,” Barrick concludes.

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Casper de Boer, a post-doctoral fellow at York University in Toronto, Ontario, works with a Memory & Company member participating in a study led by Associate Professor Lauren E. Sergio, PhD, to investigate how the brain controls movement

record of things (such as how they like their coffee), and for note-taking. All of our staff carry iPads. And the whole place has Wi-Fi access.

There is a full digital movie theater here as well, and we can put anything we want on our screens, including pictures and videos of members. Everything we do is connected to technology, from documentation to many of our activities and programs.

We also partner with different agencies and institutions, including Baycrest Health Sciences in Toronto, which focuses on geriatric care and education. We work with a dementia researcher from York University, Toronto, testing a videogame approach to assessing visuomotor behavior in people with memory loss; and we run the Minds in Motion program in conjunction with the Alzheimer Society of Toronto (see the sidebar "Partnering for progress against dementia" on page 43 for more information).

ML: *How did you get started?*

AK: After incorporating the company in 2008, we started putting everything together slowly. By January 2013, we were working on our concept full time. We took possession of our current venue in January 2015 and opened five months later, in May.

Because our day care concept is the first of its kind in Canada, and we're not attached to an academic institution or hospital, it was quite challenging to find a place to get started. There were lots of issues with permissions and zoning requirements, and towns that wouldn't even allow us to be in the area. And we had specific requirements that made it even more difficult—for example, I insisted on a space without stairs, because the stair experience can be terrifying for people with dementia as their depth perception is affected.

We ended up taking over what was originally an office space. Memory & Company is on the main floor of a two-story building, and has its own entrance with a ramp. There are floor-to-ceiling

windows, which are important because we wanted lots of bright light, and lots of green, outdoor space, which was also important to me.

Once we took over the space, we added a kitchen, bathrooms and a full spa bath. We reconfigured the interior design and completely redecorated, with new flooring, walls and lighting. We didn't have to change the exterior, other than adding the outdoor lounge.

ML: *I imagine your staff need to not only share your vision, but also feel comfortable working in a start-up. How did you make your hiring decisions?*

AK: Because I've been in this industry for quite a while, I knew a number of people who were interested, so some really good, experienced people followed me into the business. I wanted people who, regardless of their title, were willing to do everything involved in keeping our members engaged and feeling like they're special. Our staff is a mix of everything from personal support workers to social workers, to recreation therapists and nurses. Everybody helps everyone else, whether it involves taking members to the bathroom or leading our program and activities.

ML: *How do people join Memory & Company?*

AK: We do an assessment for every potential member and a trial day where the family is on call. At that time, we determine the person's level of care. Some background is collected to see the kinds of things we can do to keep the person calm and relaxed, and we find out what he or she likes. Once someone joins, we get a complete history and life story.

Memory & Company offers a variety of plans, including fixed monthly plans

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Memory & Company provides the Minds in Motion® program for the Alzheimer Society of Toronto, Ontario. The eight-week program features physical activity and mental stimulation for individuals with dementia, accompanied by their caregivers. Image courtesy of the Alzheimer Society of Toronto

ranging from a half-day to seven days a week, as well as flexible plans. All plans offer different levels of care to suit the member's needs and lifestyle. Generally, the cost starts at about CDN\$100 for a full-day and \$65 for a half-day, depending on the level of care required.

ML: *Have you had situations in which members became aggressive or violent?*

AK: We've had times when new people have been quite upset and we've asked the family to take them home, and a couple of incidents after someone has been with us for a couple of hours. But nothing to the point where anybody felt unsafe. Because our staff have a lot of experience, we know when we've done

all we can to calm a person down, and when it's time to call the family.

We've also had a few situations in which things start escalating with somebody who has been with us for a while. In that case, we talk to the family and say that we might need to increase the person's care level until they become a little more stable. Or we may need to remove the person from the club for a while until they stabilize, and then they can return.

If someone is no longer appropriate for our club, an outside psychogeriatric team talks with the family and makes an appropriate referral. Every situation is different. Still, we do our best to not just say, "This person's not for us," and close

the door. We'll work with the families as much as possible and refer them to as many agencies and professional health as we can to help them through a challenging time.

ML: *Do family members or caregivers spend time, too?*

AK: Sometimes, when family members first come to our club, they want to stay for a bit to build trust—the comfort that everything's going to be okay. As soon as they see that their loved one is relaxed and having fun, we recommend that they step away and get the respite they need for themselves.

We find that when family members stay with a loved one, the person tends to cling to them and doesn't try to make new friends and meet new people. So, we tell these family members something like, "You know what? She's doing well. Why don't you step out for a few minutes?"

We've also had couples come to us who haven't left each other's side for 70 years and who just want to be together, and one has dementia and one doesn't. We've allowed them to stay together, but the person without dementia has to become a Memory & Company member as well. So as long as spouses accept that we're a place for people living with memory loss, we're open to that possibility. But most people use us as a respite service.

ML: *This certainly sounds like a pioneering endeavor. What lessons have you learned along the way?*

AK: We learned it's definitely much harder to do than we thought it would be when we started. Because Memory & Company is a new concept in day programs, we had to educate people about such programs and why they're needed. We discovered that there was a preconceived notion about and a stigma

behind day programs, as though they could not offer an adult club environment. It doesn't seem like a hard notion to wrap your head around, but so many places that are designed as day programs are simple rooms, like in a community center. We were saying, "Design a place that you'd like to be in, put yourselves in their shoes." And it was still hard.

The stigma carried over to our name—we started out as the Alzheimer's Health Club—and it was a big lesson learned because we couldn't fight it. While I was doing fairs and sales events, people would come up to me and say, "I hate that word," or they would avoid coming near my table because of the amount of stigma behind the disease. That's how we ended up calling ourselves a memory health club.

There need to be a lot of changes in how people perceive individuals with memory loss. We're constantly learning and trying to adapt how we market ourselves based on feedback from everyone,

because we have no template to work from. When you've been in the industry your whole life, it's sometimes hard to step away and see it from the consumers' perspective—how they don't understand the disease and think they're going to walk into a lockdown unit with everyone moaning and groaning.

Then they walk in here. They see people laughing, having fun, making friends, getting spa treatments, and they say, "Wait a minute, is this for real?" In fact, after seeing decorative skates on the walls and our knickknacks, even visitors from a local hospital said, "Aren't these people going to pick them up and throw them around?" These were trained medical professionals.

Most people with dementia don't have a high level of violence and aggression. And most of those behaviors dissipate in an attractive environment where individuals feel welcome and warm and comfortable. I'm not going to pad a wall because there's a risk one person may do

something aggressive. That person may not be right for us. I'm going to focus on making our space beautiful and wonderful for everybody else.

ML: *What are your plans for the future?*

AK: We definitely hope to grow our company. Right now, we have between 10 and 20 people a day, but we're only a year old. We can probably accommodate between 50 and 60. So we'll focus on bringing this space closer to capacity and also developing Memory & Company communities in other towns and cities. 

Marilynn Larkin, MA, is an award-winning medical writer and editor, an ACE-certified personal trainer and group fitness instructor, and originator of PosturAbility®, a program that boosts posture and self-esteem. She is also ICAA's Communications Director and a regular contributor to the Journal on Active Aging®.

Images courtesy of Memory & Company

Resources

Internet

Alzheimer Society of Toronto
<http://alz.to>

Baycrest Health Sciences
www.baycrest.org

Memory & Company
<http://memoryandcompany.com>

York University: Lauren E. Sergio
www.yorku.ca/lsergio

Multimedia

CityNews: Adult coloring books being used as therapy for those with dementia (video)

www.citynews.ca/2016/01/14/video-adult-colouring-books-being-used-as-therapy-for-those-with-dementia

CityNews: Private club caters to those living with Alzheimer's (video)
www.citynews.ca/2015/03/23/private-club-caters-to-those-living-with-alzheimers

Global News: New facility teams up with innovative researcher to help those with Alzheimer's (video)
<http://globalnews.ca/video/2309907/new-facility-teams-up-with-innovative-researcher-to-help-those-with-alzheimers>

Print

Toronto Star: Alzheimer's health club offers new type of care for seniors
www.thestar.com/life/health_wellness/2014/11/26/alzheimers_health_club_offering_new_type_of_care_for_seniors.html

YorkRegion.com: Memory and Company offers a health club-like program for those with Alzheimer's
www.yorkregion.com/community-story/5923433-memory-company-offers-a-health-club-like-program-for-those-with-alzheimer-s