



Speak, Memory

The Alzheimer's Poetry Project and the Search for Connection

DAVID ANDREW STOLER

IT'S A SURPRISINGLY WARM FEBRUARY DAY, and the HVAC at The 80th Street Residence in Manhattan doesn't quite know how to deal with it. In the sixth floor lounge the seven or so seniors who have gathered to hear poet Gary Max Glazner read make no bones about how they feel about the room temperature.

"It's hot in here!" one elderly woman says.

"We need some cool air!" shouts another.

"Open the windows," yells a gray-haired man.

Glazner, who has been quietly collecting audience members for his performance, suddenly brightens. "Maybe what we need is to make some margaritas!" he says, and the room breaks into chortles.

With their attention now firmly on him, Glazner begins his reading in a way one doesn't often see—he walks around the circle of chairs clasp ing the hands of each senior and introducing himself.

"How are you?" he says.

"Fine, fine," responds one woman.

"And how are you?" he says to the next.

"I'm just a person," she says.

As more people trickle into the room, Glazner continues to greet each one. A woman tentatively enters, and Glazner immediately takes her hand. "Hi, would you like to listen to some poetry," he asks.

"I'm a poet," she says.

"Great! Maybe you can help us."

"I wanna go back to my room," she says, and

promptly exits.

Unshaken, Glazner continues on. Some residents clap, some chatter. A few just sit in their chairs, eyes half-closed, staring into space, seemingly oblivious to what is going on around them.

Glazner begins his first poem, a raucous reading of William Blake's "The Tyger." He repeats the first line over and over—"Tyger! Tyger! burning bright"—and soon much of the group is chanting with him, some hamming it up, adding tiger noises and commentary. Some, though, remain as they were: eyes undirected, mouths closed, unaware of the reading taking place.

So Glazner changes strategies. He continues to repeat the line, sometimes comically, sometimes loudly, sometimes quietly, but now each time he does so he bends his knees in front of an audience member, takes their hands, and pumps them along to the rhythm of the poem. He goes along to each of them, following the same routine, as the group shouts aloud with him. One man who until then has been silent suddenly yells out, "That's the mascot of my university!"

"Good! Go Princeton Tigers!" Glazner says, then moves on to the next.

When he gets to one senior, a black woman who hasn't made any sign that she's aware of his presence or what has been going on, he takes her hands in his and says very quietly, "Tyger. Tyger. Burning bright." She doesn't respond, and he does it again. "Tyger, tyger, burning bright." Still nothing.

But then something strange happens. On his third repetition of the line the woman's lips open. She mouths

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the words with him. She looks up at him. And when she looks down again she is smiling.

Although reading to, performing for, and writing with underserved populations has been one of the hallmarks of the poet-in-residence movement—reaching into special education classrooms, women’s prisons, and cancer wards throughout the United States—one traditionally overlooked group still remains virtually ignored: those, like the seniors at The 80th Street Residence, who suffer from Alzheimer’s disease.

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It’s by no means a small population. According to the Alzheimer’s Foundation of America (AFA), five million people in the US suffer from Alzheimer’s—one in eight people over the age of 65. With a well-documented surge of that population coming soon, the AFA thinks the number of Alzheimer’s sufferers might more than triple over the next 40 years, meaning more and more of us will be directly touched by this devastating disease.

Yet there aren’t many outreach programs for those with cognitive diseases—one notable one is Anne Basting’s TimeSlips Project out of the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee—and those specializing in Alzheimer’s patients specifically are few and far between.

Part of the problem may lie in the difficulties of working with a population that, by the nature of its disease, is typically withdrawn, depressed, and unresponsive. How do you work with someone who, from one moment to the next, doesn’t remember why you’re there? Who, 30 seconds after you’ve asked it, doesn’t remember the question? Or who is simply vacant?

These are some of the questions Glazner was unexpectedly confronted with when, in 1997, *Poets and Writers* magazine offered a small grant for a series of workshops at a few drop-in senior centers in Northern California.

“One adult day care center was a couple of miles from the flower shop that I owned, so I applied for that one,” Glazner says of how he began working with Alzheimer’s patients. “I had no particular interest in Alzheimer’s or dementia, and they gave me no instruc-

tion except to just come and do poetry with them.”

Glazner figured older poems would work best with the elderly—classic poems they might have learned in childhood like Gelette Burgess’s “Purple Cow” and Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “How Do I Love Thee?”

Still, Glazner wasn’t exactly a traditional poet. As one of the organizers of the first National Poetry Slam in San Francisco, his roots lay in the spoken word movement. So he read those classics as a slam poet would, and in so doing made an important discovery in that first session in the adult day care center.

“I was reciting [Longfellow’s “The Arrow and the Song,”] and there was one man there whose head was down, who wasn’t participating, who was completely unaware of

his surroundings,” Glazner says. “But about halfway through the poem, his eyes popped open and he was suddenly there. It struck me then how powerful and how useful to this aspect of the community this kind of reading could be.”

During the eight sessions Glazner held at that adult day care center this scene repeated itself over and over. He read poems in a performance-oriented way—energetically, often comically—and got responses from seniors who, until then, had seemed oblivious to what was going on around them.

From that point on Glazner wanted to develop a program specifically designed for people with Alzheimer’s, but it took another seven years for him to get the chance. In 2004, then living in Santa Fe, Glazner got \$300 in seed money from the Board of New Mexico Literary Arts to start what would eventually become the Alzheimer’s Poetry Project (APP).

Glazner took what he saw in that original Northern California performance and ran with it, forming not the typical workshops of a writer-in-residence, but a presentation of those classic poems that further mixed the techniques he honed as a Slam Poet. By alternating between high energy poems and more poignant selections, each APP performance became an event specifically designed to get its listeners actively engaged in the reading and recitation of the work.

Now a typical APP session like the one at The 80th Street Residence includes both oral and physical interaction, with Glazner or one of the other ten poets in 15

States associated with the APP often taking the hands of unresponsive patients and pumping them along with the rhythm of a poem. APP poets chant with the patients; they lead them in song; they ask them questions and integrate their answers into the poems themselves.

“Everything we do is reinforced with call and response,” Glazner says. “On a technical level [the patients] are performing with you, and we’re tapping into the power of poetry as performance.”

At The 80th Street Residence, for example, after the first line of Burgess’s poem—“I never saw a purple cow”—Glazner bent before several non-participating audience members.

“Can I ask you a question?” he’d say. “Have you ever seen a purple cow?” Often enough the patient, who had had glazed eyes up to that moment, would smile and respond. Sometimes they’d answer the question. “No, I haven’t,” said one woman. “I’m sleeping now,” said another.

In his book for the project, *Sparkling Memories*, Glazner lays the foundation for others to work with Alzheimer’s patients independently of the APP. Meanwhile, the APP has branched out to include the training of healthcare workers and caretakers in both conferences and workshops. In 2006, the National Endowment for the Arts named the APP a “best practice” for the aging and the arts.

While there have been few scientific studies on the connection between interaction and improved cognitive function in those suffering from dementia or Alzheimer’s, there is evidence to suggest that guided poetry recitation can increase well-being in people in general. According to a study published in the April 8, 2004 issue of the *American Journal of Physiology*, the guided recitation of hexameter verse—namely ancient Greek poetry—lowered blood pressure and increased blood flow to the brain of study participants. Lower heart rates, steadier, more relaxed breathing patterns, and increased cardiorespiratory control were also noted—and doctors consider all to be therapeutic.

Glazner is certainly aware of the link, and is convinced it lies in the way the brain is built. Poetry as a narrative form of remembering is so deeply ingrained in our

minds that, even with the extreme short-term memory loss seen in Alzheimer’s sufferers, it simply needs to be accessed to be remembered.

“I think of it in terms of [poet] Jane Hirshfield’s idea of ‘poetry as vessel of remembrance,’ going back to the Greeks, the Griots in Africa, and the original structure of oral history,” Glazner says. “The structure of our minds keeps history by rhymed, rhythmic information.” The classic poems he reads access data stored deep inside the heads of Alzheimer’s patients, brings out their childhood memories, and, in so doing, gives them a sense of themselves again.

But even more important to Glazner are the quality-of-life benefits that he so clearly sees each time he performs with a group of Alzheimer’s patients. “You take a person who’s in a facility, they don’t get the playfulness,” he says. “There’s a lack of human touch, especially in the context of fun, and that’s what they’re responding to with us.”

It’s a response patients don’t often have the opportunity to feel. “Traditionally,” Glazner says, “the types of activities patients get to do are kind of little kids’

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things—making a turkey from my hand print, that kind of thing. But our goal is first to have fun with them, to play with them. That kind of thing is something they just aren’t getting.”

Yet it’s something they desperately need. According to the AFA, “depression may cause or worsen memory loss and other cognitive impairment.” Given that so many Alzheimer’s patients lack the basic stimulus they as adults crave, the inherent playfulness in Glazner’s approach couldn’t be more serious.

“The core of the project is quality-of-life—can we reach them with this sort of art/cultural programming,” he says.

Massiel Vargas, a 21-year-old recreational assistant at The 80th Street Residence, says the answer is a clear yes. “[The residents] feel lonely sometimes,” she says. “But with this, they’re more active. They enjoy it, and

they all participate. Otherwise, you know, they'll just fall asleep. They won't do anything."

For Glazner, the results speak for themselves. "It's striking. You walk into the room, ten people are in wheelchairs and aren't really focused on anything. By the middle, everyone is smiling, laughing, totally engaged and looking at you," he says.

More, Glazner says that he is constantly being told stories by healthcare workers about how, after a performance, patients will talk to them about things they hadn't brought up for a long time—loved ones, emotional experiences, etc.—and that patients who are otherwise unresponsive refer back to the session after it's over.

"We see moods being elevated, we see people being really engaged. These people are living in the moment, but they can laugh. If the group is laughing, everybody laughs," he says.

Now Glazner—currently the Managing Director of Bowery Arts & Sciences, the not-for-profit wing of New York City's Bowery Poetry Club—is looking to expand the APP even further. In 2008 the APP got a grant from the AFA to work with students as young as nine years old, teaching them to recite and perform the kinds of poems—in the kinds of ways—that get people with Alzheimer's excited. "We're actively looking for partnerships with teachers and poets who want to use these techniques," Glazner says.

Of course, the current financial climate isn't necessarily helping. Donations to groups like the APP are down across the country. According Glazner individual

donations to Bowery Arts & Sciences are down nearly 80% from last year, and grants in general are becoming more and more competitive.

Still, Glazner is hopeful about finding new people to be a part of the program. "With Obama coming in, . . . people are starting to volunteer. I've had three volunteers in the past three days," he says.

At The 80th Street Residence, Glazner works with the seniors for about an hour. You can see, as he moves from one poem to the next, how residents suffering from different degrees of Alzheimer's react differently. Some are with him all along, offering lines of the poems, commenting on them. Others are in and out, often literally grasping at the air with their hands, as if struggling to catch a hold of the meaning of something he says. Nearly all, though, are entranced by him.

The woman who announced she was a poet, and then promptly left for her room, comes back into the circle five times. Each time, Glazner greets her the same way, and each time she tells him she's a poet, then retreats again, the same scene repeating itself as if it hadn't happened before. Finally, when Glazner greets her on her sixth trip, she tells him, "Can I talk to you for a moment?"

"Of course," he says.

"I'm a poet," she says.

"That's wonderful," Glazner says. "I'm a poet too! We're writing a poem here."

"I can help you," she says. And then, for the first time, she sits down to join them. ☺

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