

Barber caters to men with dementia

Gene Myers Morristown Daily Record
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Tunes from The Great American Songbook, the scent of citrus after-shave and old-fashioned tools of the trade transformed an assisted-living beauty parlor for women into an old-fashioned barbershop to trigger memories and calm men with dementia, if just long enough for a shave and a haircut.

Against the backdrop of floral wallpaper and a row of hard bonnet hair dryers, Lenny White, the "Dementia-Friendly Barber" from Ireland, engaged the men in conversation on war, sports and life, reminiscent of those that took place in the barber shops of their youth.

"Going to a barbershop is something that you enjoy as men, and I wanted to bring that back," White said. "I want to create a setting they are familiar with."

Howard Smith squinted and watched closely as White asked how he liked his hair and beard cut. Not a hard question for many, but this wing of the Chelsea at Montville, where Smith lives, is reserved for those with the most severe cases of memory loss.

"Do you keep the beard usually? Do you mind if I trim it for you?" asked the 38-year-old who traveled to North Jersey from Bangor, Ireland.

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"Whatever you gotta do," Smith said. "I usually keep the beard and the mustache."

In no time, tufts of white hair were floating to the floor as the barber with the Irish brogue set to work. In a dark-denim apron covered in white hair clippings, he leaned over to look his customers in the eyes, placed his hand on their shoulder or back and patiently waited for replies.

During his haircut, Smith told the barber he liked to keep his hair short and neat. That wasn't always the case, said Renee Chimento, lifestyles director of the assisted-living facility. Smith

had long hair and a long beard when he first moved in. Before that, she said, after he retired as electronics technician for IBM, Smith rode around the country on a Harley.

White buzzed beards and trimmed hair for his customers, who arrived in wheelchairs or walked with the aid of canes and walkers throughout the day Thursday, his last in the United States before he returned home to Ireland.

Memories in Alzheimer's patients can be jogged by smells and music, said Kenneth Zaentz, president of Alzheimer's New Jersey.

"The nerve cells in the brain are dying. The brain is literally shrinking," Zaentz said of the neurological disease that attacks short-term memories first, then long-term ones. "We want to do as much as possible to continue to stimulate those memories."

When Leroy Whitman sat in the barber's chair, the 89-year-old's memories were triggered by Irish music coming from White's boombox. He talked of a trip to the Emerald Isle he took with his wife years before she died. He remembered drinking Guinness and kissing the Blarney Stone.

"I don't know how hard I kissed it," he said.

White said after he volunteered to cut hair at an assisted-living facility in Northern Ireland, he came to realize there was a real need for this special service to men with dementia.

He said the men connect to him. In fact, he said, the need is so great that this is now his full-time job. Every day he loads his car with his tools, a barber pole and his tunes and travels to nursing homes, private homes and anywhere there is a man who might benefit from his newfound skills.

There are a lot of unknowns when it comes to dementia, like why it affects some people and not others, or what causes it to spread, Zaentz said.

"We know that people can still respond to music. We know that they can still respond to smell, and things that were familiar in the past can really stimulate people who have dementia



and help engage them and bring them back to a time that was,” Zaentz said. “They may not remember your name, but you can still have a loving relationship with the person with the disease if you connect with them at the place they are.”

“Going to a barbershop is something that you enjoy as men, and I wanted to bring that back.”

Lenny White
Barber

On the web

Watch Lenny White kid around with the men in his chair. **NorthJersey.com**



Lenny White, a barber from Northern Ireland, gives a complimentary haircut to Constantine Soukas, 83, a resident of The Chelsea of Montville, an assisted-living facility, on Thursday.

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