# Insight

Alzheimer Society BRITISH COLUMBIA

For people living with dementia

Summer 2025

## Travel and tranquility

Summertime is here! Whether you're exploring new trails, reading in the shade, or enjoying a breezy patio, make sure to bring this issue of *Insight* along as one of your summer reads.

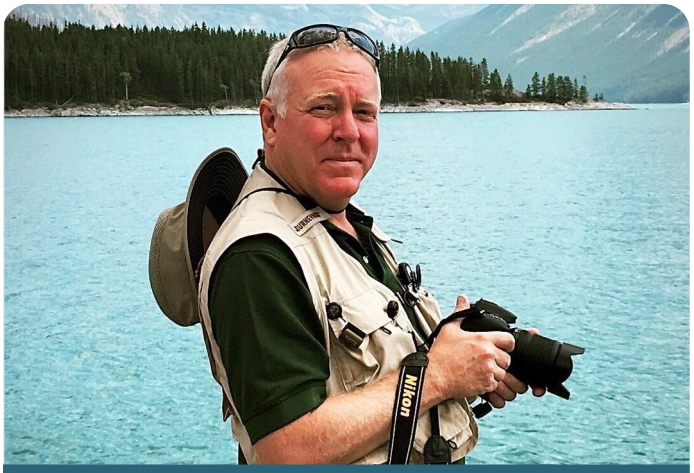
In this edition, we receive a warm welcome from Art Harrison and feature Jim Stuart's insights and experiences with early-stage support groups, along with a guest article from our collaborator, Vancouver International Airport (YVR). Discover how lived experience partners shape our course development and explore exciting program updates. We're also highlighting Dr. Printha Wijesinghe's cutting-edge research. This season's Artist in Residence, Judith Rees-Thomas, offers us reflections on self-compassion and gratitude.

Packed with information and inspiration, we hope this issue adds to the joy and brightness of the summer months. Consider reaching out to *Insight* to share how you spent your summer! Turn to **page 8** for details on how to submit your story or photos.

Join us for a webinar on Wednesday, July 9, co-presented with the team at YVR to share our collaboration and journey toward making YVR a dementia-friendly airport. To register, visit **alzbc.org/webinars**.

**In this issue:**

# Greetings




Art Harrison

*Art Harrison is a member of the Alzheimer Society of B.C.'s Lived Experience Partner Program. Originally from the West Kootenay region, he now calls Vancouver home. In his spare time, Art enjoys creative outlets like writing and music.*

Contrary to what some may think about dementia, it is not necessarily the same for everyone. Many assume that it is a singular affliction that just erases an individual's memories of the past or even all ability to store any memories whatsoever. It doesn't appear to be so straightforward or simplistic. A variety of symptoms can appear in an individual, some similar to those I have mentioned, but in many different shades and degrees.

My experience so far is more one of losing my working memory, my immediate memory of what I am in the process of doing. On the other hand, I can remember experiences from the past, even some from the distant past... events, conversations and feelings I felt in a particular situation.

But, for me, every season evokes memories from the past: winter days skiing, snowshoeing, building snow forts, the Great Snowball War of 1976, autumn days jumping into piles of leaves from our maple tree, brisk spring days turning soil and pulling weeds from the garden beds of the previous year.

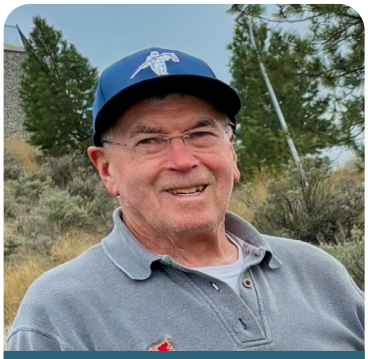
But so many of the fonder memories I still carry with me seem to be of summers past. I spent many of my summers going to a summer camp on Kootenay Lake in the Interior of B.C. It has been in operation since the 1930s and my mother went there as a teen and continued every summer for most of her life, as did I and my siblings.

So, for me, summers tend to be remembered as leisure time – camping, sunning on beaches, outdoor sports, eating ripe fruit from the tree, warm evenings by a campfire....

Whatever your summer may look like, I hope you have time for leisure, time to enjoy life in whatever way that may look like for you.

- Art Harrison

# Helping hands and finding purpose through dementia



Jim Stuart

Jim Stuart divides his time between Kamloops in the colder months and his cabin on Shuswap Lake when the weather warms. Each spring, he returns to open the cabin and lend a hand to his neighbours – something he has always enjoyed.

Jim began his career in construction at the Kamloops Pulp Mill, moving from operations to obtaining a Millwright Apprenticeship and retiring as maintenance superintendent after 38 years. Retirement at 55 didn't slow him down. Instead, he launched a handyman business, renovated several homes and kept doing what he does best – keeping his hands busy.

However, everything took a turn in 2023. Jim woke up with sudden dizziness, initially thought to be vertigo. It wasn't until May 2024, after further testing, that he was diagnosed with a major neurocognitive disorder, a term that falls under the umbrella of dementia. "I was really concerned," Jim says. "The biggest thing for me was wanting to know what exactly is it that I have."

That search for answers led him to Tara Hildebrand, Support and Education Coordinator at the Alzheimer Society of B.C. in Kamloops. "That first conversation was very enlightening," Jim says. "There was so much more information out there that I didn't know about."

Jim now regularly attends early-stage support groups, where he finds both comfort and community. "The group has grown over time. People opened up and it has helped me understand the importance of sleep and managing my energy."

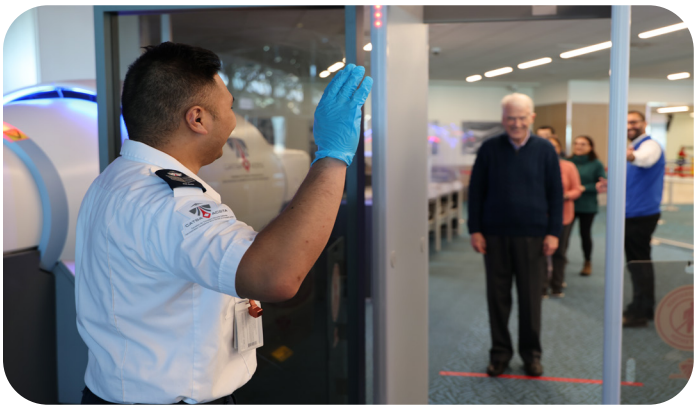
While he's learning to manage his symptoms, Jim hasn't stopped lending a hand. "I don't feel pressured – it's just who I am and always willing to help. But I'm also focusing on preparing things for my children. That matters more now."

At 78, Jim is working to maintain his fitness and stay active. His days are full, working on his vintage truck, getting the cabin ready and golfing with friends. He keeps his mind sharp with puzzles and even a little online poker. "I don't know how much time I have – two years, five, twenty? But I'm staying active and engaged."

His advice for people living with dementia? "Do what makes sense for you and take the time to understand what stage you're at, that makes all the difference."

Early-stage support groups offer a welcoming space for people living with early symptoms of dementia to connect with others who are on a similar journey. Learn more: **alzbc.org/support-groups**.

# Building a dementia-friendly airport: YVR's ongoing commitment



*From Vancouver International Airport (YVR)*

At YVR, we are committed to providing a universally accessible and welcoming experience for all travellers. We are proud to partner with the Alzheimer Society of B.C. to better support people living with dementia, along with their families and care partners, as they travel through the airport. In 2023, YVR was honoured to receive the Dementia-Friendly Large Organization award from Dementia-Friendly Canada.

As a part of our ongoing commitment to enhance accessibility, our Guest Experience team and Green Coat volunteers have participated in dementia awareness training. These sessions provide staff with the tools to recognize signs of dementia, effective communication strategies and ways to respond with patience and understanding. This is a key step in ensuring YVR is a dementia-friendly airport.

In alignment with our 3-Year Accessibility Plan, YVR continues to expand programs and services for guests who may need additional support. This includes:

**Curbside Assistance** is available 24/7 and includes assisting guests with wheelchairs or mobility devices, baggage and providing mobility or guidance assistance, including navigational supports.

**Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Program**: The sunflower lanyard, worn by some travellers, is a signal to staff across our airport community that travellers may have a non-visible disability and may need extra time or assistance. Sunflower lanyards or stickers are available for pick-up at YVR's information counters.

**Quiet spaces**, located throughout the airport, serve as designated areas equipped with sound-damping furniture to support guests who may experience sensory sensitivities, cognitive overload or anxiety.

**YVR's Travel Rehearsal Program** offers practice runs to help individuals, along with their families and care partners, become familiar with the airport layout, reducing travel-related stress and preparing them for their upcoming journey through YVR.

Through our partnership, we are listening, learning and adapting our services to better meet the evolving needs of people living with dementia.

**Learn more!**

To learn about YVR's three-year accessibility plan, visit **alzbc.org/yvr**.

# Lived experience partners share golden ideas for program development

Don Cheeseman (left) and Tobias Jesso (right)

Don Cheeseman joined other lived experience partners in the fall of 2024 to talk about a new workshop for the Alzheimer Society of B.C. But his first goal was not to talk.

His goal was to listen. "I was reticent to speak out at first," Don said. "I was only listening and thinking for most of the session."

He was careful when offering advice. Fortunately, this former engineer and educator grew more comfortable and shared important ideas. When asked about the experience recently, Don remained modest. However, his ideas have had a lasting impact.

This was a meaningful learning opportunity for us that involved thoughtful effort from our lived experience partners. Discussions like these help us create learning materials to better support our clients. The valuable insights shared in these meetings help us shape materials to meet diverse needs.

Lived experience partners evaluations help us to present accurate, inclusive information and reach more people who can benefit from our programs.

Tobias Jesso, another lived experience partner, participated in the same project.

"I appreciated being heard," the tech professional said. "I am a social person and I enjoy my interactions with others, especially in a learning environment."

Like Don and others in the group, Tobias offered important insights about proposed materials.

Arabella Bengson, another educator, also shared her responses in the meetings she describes as "very comfortable."

Fred Keating, an arts professional, was another lived experience partner who contributed as well. He liked working with others for a common goal. "The fact that we pulled together created…our own community..."

Opportunities to learn from people living with dementia and their care partners make us better. The real-life experience our lived experience partners share about their everyday issues reveals priorities and nuances.

Thank you to our lived experience partners for helping make our supports more meaningful for people on the journey.

# Can tears predict Alzheimer's disease?

Dr. Printha Wijesinghe, a Post-doctoral Fellow in the Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences at University of BC (UBC) is investigating whether molecules in tear fluid can provide early clues about Alzheimer's. In 2023, Printha received a Post-doctoral Award from the Alzheimer Society Research Program (ASRP) to study the role of microRNAs – tiny molecules that help regulate how our genes function – in the progression of the disease.

Like blood, tears contain valuable biological information and are an even less invasive option. MicroRNAs act like switches or dimmers in the body, turning genes on or off, reducing inflammation and managing harmful proteins. Because they stay stable in fluids like tears, they may offer a cost-effective and accessible way to detect disease – potentially even before symptoms appear.

Using human eye tissue and specially developed mouse models, Printha and her team are exploring how changes of microRNA levels in tears – a fluid closely linked to the brain and nervous system – might be used to assess Alzheimer's disease. We asked Printha to share what the team has discovered so far.

**What were the key findings of your research?**
The microRNAs we studied in the lab help reduce harmful proteins and inflammation in the brain and are present in tears. We found that mice who had genes similar to those found in people living with familial Alzheimer's disease had lower levels of these microRNA in their tears. Their microRNA levels were low each time we tested them – at three, six and twelve months. This may mean the microRNA molecules aren't working as well as they should to protect against Alzheimer's disease.

**What was the most exciting or unexpected result you discovered?** We found that in younger mice (about three-months old, similar to people in their 20s), microRNA levels were high in areas of the brain responsible for memory, learning and higher-level thinking but low in their tears. This suggests that in people born with genes that cause Alzheimer's disease, their tears may show low microRNA levels in early adulthood – while the brain is still trying to fight the disease. Detecting these low levels could offer guidance for when genetic testing, disease screening and ongoing monitoring might be helpful.

**What are the next steps for your research?**
We've started testing microRNAs in tear samples from people aged 60 and older who have early-stage Alzheimer's disease or mild cognitive impairment (MCI) and people of the same age without Alzheimer's or MCI. We've found that certain microRNAs are much higher in tear fluids, which means they may be helping to block some of the brain-related changes linked to the disease. Given these results, I'm excited to recruit more participants to strengthen our findings.

# Living with dementia

It is almost four years now since this unwelcome guest moved into our home. I find I am increasingly confused and disoriented. I'm hesitant to do simple things like opening a can of soup, in case I mess up.

I was used to being in charge, knowing what needed to be done and how to do it. Now I have to ask for help many times a day. "How does this lid go on?" "Where do we keep the pasta?" "Will you remind me what I promised I would do for the Vestry meeting?" Today, I put my hand into my pocket as I was leaving from visiting with a friend and I pulled out a phone that belonged in her house. I had no recollection of picking it up and it is a very different shape from my phone, which was in another pocket. I remember, when I was visiting an elderly friend in a care home, hearing another resident proclaiming that someone had stolen her shoe. It is easy for me now to see how such accusations happen. In fact, they are true, except that the intention was not to steal anything.

Today we were chatting after church and I wanted to say something about a gathering at the Saturna Lodge. I began the sentence and drew a blank on the word, "Lodge." I stood there, a little group around me, with no word coming to my mind or out of my mouth. "Um, the place where you go…" I waved my arm in the direction of the Lodge. Amazingly, two people read my mind and supplied the missing word. Remembering the scene from this distance, I can see it is something that might happen to anyone, but I was embarrassed.

"There is nothing to be embarrassed about," I told myself. It is how it is. "We," I say to myself, "have to get used to it. It's a condition, not a judgement on our intelligence."

Dementia is something I cannot control. What I can do is enjoy walking with friends, soaking in the sunshine while it is here, and watching for things to be thankful for.

– Judith Rees-Thomas, lived experience partner.

### Learn about our Lived Experience Partner Program

Lived experience partners support our mission to ensure no one has to face the journey alone by sharing their experiences and insights. If you would like to learn more about how to get involved, please email us at **livedexperience@alzheimerbc.org** or visit **alzbc.org/LivedExperience**.

## Subscribe

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- Subscribe online at **alzbc.org/insight-newsletter**
- Call 604-681-6530 or toll-free 1-800-667-3742

## Contribute

We welcome contributions, such as personal stories, photography or original poems, from people living with dementia. Please provide your name, mailing address, phone number and/or email address if you would like to be contacted. All submissions will be considered based on theme and space.

- Email **insight@alzheimerbc.org**
- Call 604-681-6530 or toll-free 1-800-667-3742
- Mail to the Alzheimer Society of B.C., care of *Insight*:
  300-828 West 8th Avenue
  Vancouver, B.C.  V5Z 1E2

## Call the First Link® Dementia Helpline

A confidential, province-wide support and information service for anyone with questions about dementia. Our Helpline is available from Monday to Friday.

- English: 1-800-936-6033
  (9 a.m. – 8 p.m.)
- Punjabi, Hindi and Urdu: 1-833-674-5003
  (9 a.m. – 4 p.m.)
- Cantonese or Mandarin: 1-833-674-5007
  (9 a.m. – 4 p.m.)

  Email **info.helpline@alzheimerbc.org**

## Are you a caregiver?

*Connections* is a quarterly print and digital publication produced by the Alzheimer Society of B.C.

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