

NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Tuesday, September 8, 2015

Language is a powerful tool for creating awareness, fighting stigma



Vancouver, B.C. — September is World Alzheimer’s Month and as part of its #RememberDementia campaign, the Alzheimer Society of B.C. wants to call attention to the power of language – both to reinforce and to fight stigma.

Language can perpetuate stigma and stereotypes. Language used to describe Alzheimer's disease and other dementias has historically been largely negative, focusing on the losses experienced by the person living with dementia. While these losses are real, this negative framing has contributed to perceptions and approaches to care that focus on weakness rather than strength, illness rather than wellness and victims rather than whole persons. So, for example, the Society prefers the term “person with dementia” to a “dementia sufferer” or someone “afflicted” with the disease.

“We advocate for a person-centred approach to the language of dementia, and the disease in general,” says Maria Howard, Alzheimer Society of B.C. CEO. “There is so much work to be done to raise awareness and encourage compassion about the disease. We’ve all heard someone make an ‘Alzheimer’s joke’ about being forgetful. This perpetuates the stigma felt by people with dementia and their families. We don’t make the same kind of jokes about cancer or another serious disease.”

But language can also offer space for awareness and growth. With her memoir, *The Long Hello*, Vancouver author Cathie Borrie shares her experience with her mother’s dementia in the form of brief, lyrical vignettes that create a magical voice and weave humour and insight into an honest, raw, and beautiful story.

“As her dementia progressed, my mother became a poet and said the most amazing things, and I think it was the poet in her that released the writer in me,” says Borrie. “My mother taught me that her spirit continued, the soul of her persisted, and she invited me to stay connected and loving in whatever way I could. I tried to do this with song and music, through touch, by following her lead, by taping her voice – and finally by offering her story, our story, in *The Long Hello*.”

We’ll continue the conversation on our website, www.alzheimerbc.org, and social media.

BACKGROUNDER:

How would *you* like to be remembered?

Our memory helps us build and maintain our identity. It tells us who we are, the experiences we have lived, the friends and family we have and the knowledge we have accumulated over the years. Recently, at some of our support groups, we asked people with dementia to talk about the kind of memories they hope to create for themselves and their families. We will be thinking about this question and sharing some of their responses this month.

Memory loss is also one of the most commonly-known signs of dementia. For more information about memory loss, please refer to: <http://alzbc.org/Memory-Loss-PDF>.

Creating awareness through language.

Language is our unique human gift and a powerful means of communication. Words can inform and comfort us, excite and thrill us or inspire action. Words can also rattle our nerves, discourage our initiative and chip away at our self-confidence. We can react physically and emotionally to what is said to us and about us.

The Alzheimer Society of B.C. advocates a person-centred approach to communication. This means we view people with dementia first and foremost as individuals, with unique attributes, personal values and history. For more information about person-centred language, refer to: <http://alzbc.org/Person-Centred-Language-PDF>.

Fostering understanding, awareness and inclusion through Dementia Friends and dementia-friendly communities.

The Alzheimer Society of B.C. is working with municipalities, professionals, corporations and volunteers to better support people with dementia through our Dementia-Friendly Communities initiative.

Community members who are dementia friendly recognize that:

- A person with dementia is more than their diagnosis.
- Dementia can affect a person’s cognition, behaviour, emotions and physical capabilities.

- Everyone has a role to play in recognizing people with dementia as a part of their community and supporting their independence, value and inclusion.

For more information about the Dementia-Friendly Communities initiative, please visit:

<http://alzbc.org/dementia-friendly-communities>

Events support people living with Alzheimer's disease and other dementias in our communities.

Want to make a difference in the lives of people affected by dementia? Dollars raised at our events allow the Society to support the 70,000 British Columbians and their families affected by the disease. Events coming up this month are:

- Coffee Break, September 17, 2015 and for the month thereafter. For more info: www.coffeekbreakbc.ca
- *Mt. Kilimanjaro Grouse Grind for Alzheimer's* (MKGG), September 27, 2015. For more info: www.hikemkkg.com
- *Ascent for Alzheimer's*, late September, 2015. For more info: www.ascentbc.ca

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Campaign hashtag: #RememberDementia

Society leaders and other spokespeople are available for interview throughout September; Q&A's with writers Cathie Borrie and Jane Munro are now available on our website. Photos are also available upon request.

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About dementia

Dementia is a term that describes a general group of brain disorders. Symptoms include the loss of memory, impaired judgment, and changes in behaviour and personality. Dementia is progressive, degenerative and eventually terminal. Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia accounting for almost two-thirds of dementias in Canada today.

About the Alzheimer Society of B.C.

The Alzheimer Society of B.C. provides a provincial network of support and education for families impacted by dementia and people concerned about memory loss. Communities across the province count on the Society for support services, information and education programs, advocacy to improve dementia care in B.C. and to fund research to find the causes and cures. As part of a national federation, the Society is a leading authority on the disease in Canada.



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