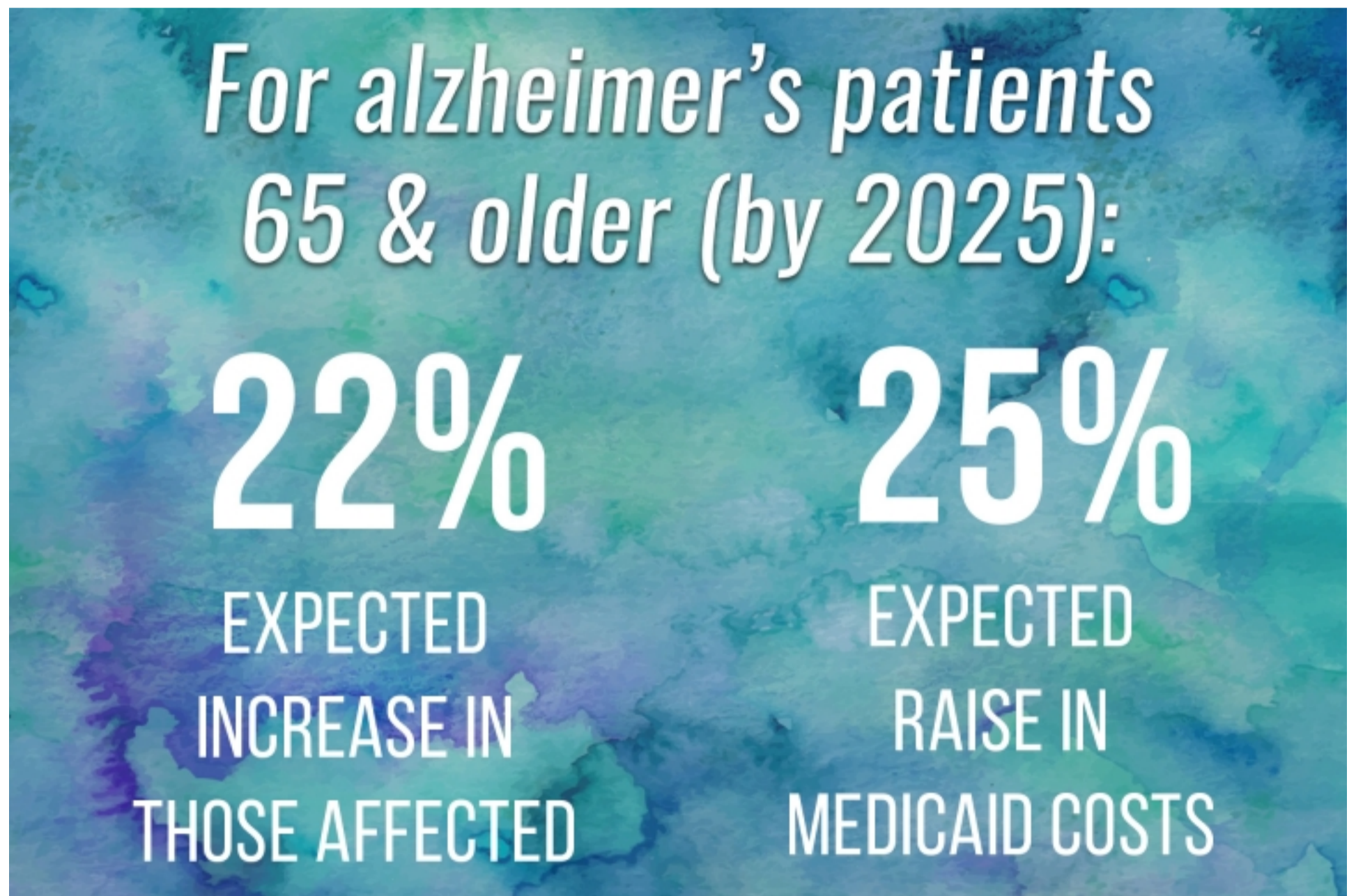


Stamps professor uses creative arts to connect with adults living with dementia

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Expectations of Alzheimer's patients 65 and older. Buy this photo (<http://store.pub.umich.edu/michigan-daily-buy-this-photo/>)

Design by Alec Cohen

[LIAT WEINSTEIN \(/AUTHOR/WEINSL\)](#)

Daily Staff Reporter

The walls of Michigan Alzheimer's Disease Center, a research hub and medical center for those facing memory loss, are dotted with bright watercolor paintings — “works of art,” as Hank Paulson, the director of the center and University professor of neurology, calls them. These paintings were created by patients in the center as part of a therapeutic program led by Anne Mondro, an associate professor at the School of Art & Design, and the students of her Memory, Aging and Expressive Arts class.

“When those people with dementia made those works of art, there was a feeling of accomplishment that was satisfying to them that basically allowed them to be socially interacting with the world around them to have a positive impact themselves,” Paulson said. “And I think that is therapeutic.”

For the past 15 years, Mondro’s work has provided emotional support and brain stimulation for those suffering from memory loss in a state where Alzheimer’s Disease, the most prevalent form of dementia, is the sixth leading cause of death in the nation. As the Baby Boomer generation continues to age, the number of patients with Alzheimer’s 65 and older is expected to grow 22 percent by 2025 and raise Medicaid costs by nearly 25 percent, according to scientists.

Alzheimer’s and other types of dementia progress slowly—the average person lives between four and eight years after receiving the diagnosis — so memory loss centers often focus on raising a patient’s quality of life through programs like Mondro’s art therapy. Kathi Tobey, a memory loss specialist at Michigan Medicine’s Silver Club Programs, said art offers those living with dementia an outlet for creativity in ways words often cannot.

“(Creative art) doesn’t have boundaries,” Tobey said. “As memory loss increases, (people who are diagnosed) can still can be creative, they just are more creative in an abstract way. So a lot of the art that gets produced for our folks with moderate memory loss, is more abstract ... It doesn’t have to be done a certain way, so it offers folks this avenue that is open-ended.”

Mondro’s work focuses mainly on the intersection of art, illness and disease. In 2014, Mondro began offering a course to Arts & Design students — an outgrowth of her previous community engagement course, *Retaining Identity: the role of creativity in health care* — created in 2006. In the course, students work with the Silver Club Mild Memory Loss program to develop creative arts projects in partnership with Ann Arbor community members facing dementia.

Laura Rice-Oeschger, a geriatric clinical social worker who served as a lecturer in Mondro’s class, said in an email the students’ work often helps patients feel as though their lives have a more defined sense of purpose. She noted how those facing memory loss can suffer from depression or loneliness when they begin to lose the ability to express their creativity.

“Isolation, loneliness, difficulty with communication and feelings of incompetence are among the many challenges our participants face, adding further insult to dignity, self-worth and most importantly, a sense of being connected to shared humanity,” Rice-Oeschger said. “The need to be seen, included, valued and engaged in life can be realized through art.”

In 2017, Mondro and Charlie Michaels, the associate director for experiential learning at the University's Center for Socially Engaged Design, were awarded a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to pursue a project titled "Between the Earth and Sky." The program paired youth in the southeast Michigan area with adults facing dementia to create two creative arts projects — one representing "earth," and the other "sky."

Michaels said the cross-generational nature of the program gave youth a greater understanding of how to care for and empathize with those suffering from memory loss. He emphasized the need for students to listen to those with dementia and indulge in their interests in order to create a more meaningful experience.

"If someone is really into a particular thing and there's actually a next step they should move onto to complete the project, just let them keep doing that thing," Michaels said. "Why stop the skill of being able to pay attention to people and how they're responding to things and ask questions to figure out what they're enjoying?"

Michaels also said receiving the NEA grant with Mondro led him to realize how those with dementia often lack choice in their daily lives— a crucial aspect of identity that, if taken away, can impair a person's sense of happiness and fulfillment.

"For an older adult living with memory loss who's living in a facility of some kind, there's not a lot of choice in their day," Michaels said. "They eat when meals are, they go to bed when it's bedtime — there's a limited number of activities. Having something new to do and being able to make decisions about it, even a decision as simple as do you want to use the orange paint or the blue paint. We're putting agency back on them to be able to make decisions."

Kinesiology senior Beatrice Lucchesi worked with community members facing dementia in Psychology 211: Project Outreach, a course that pairs students with community organizations across Ann Arbor. She said the class inspired her to create Music for Dementia, a student organization that uses music to connect with those living with memory loss, and allowed her to gain a deeper understanding of the direct effect art can have on brain stimulation. Lucchesi also noted how music therapies are often not used in the health care setting even though they can help patients reconnect with old memories, if only for a brief moment.

“The way that art and music work, they help bypass these damaged neurons and pathways in the brain and they help recover little pieces of memory,” Lucchesi said. “It’s not a miracle, they don’t help you regain your memory back, but little snippets here and there. This really helps to improve mood and attention and engagement of the patient.”

Paulson echoed Lucchesi’s statement, saying programs like Mondro’s are often overlooked even though they have been shown to greatly improve the quality of life for patients with dementia.

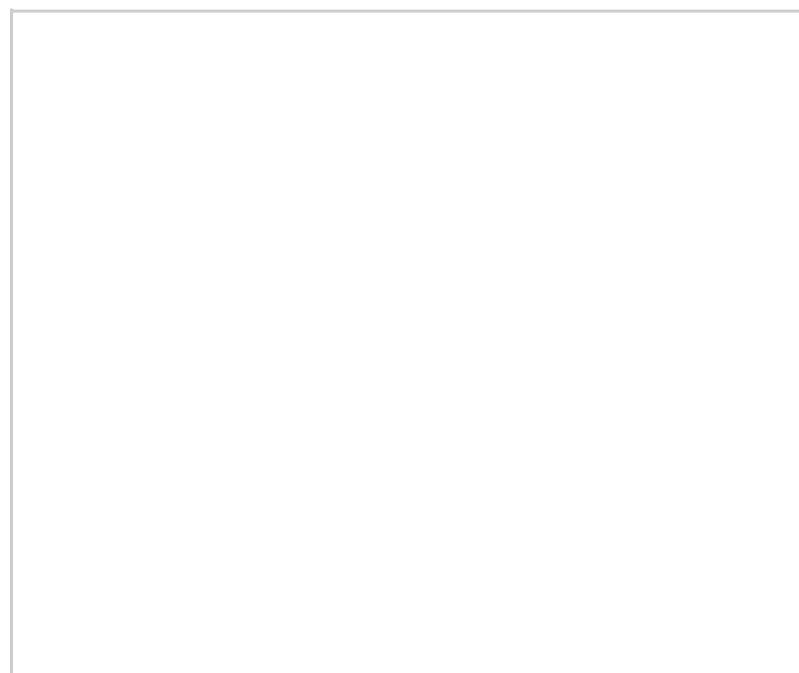
“The social and educational dynamics that can occur with art, creative expression, is something that’s often missed,” Paulson said. “(Mondro) has made that a central part of her work.”

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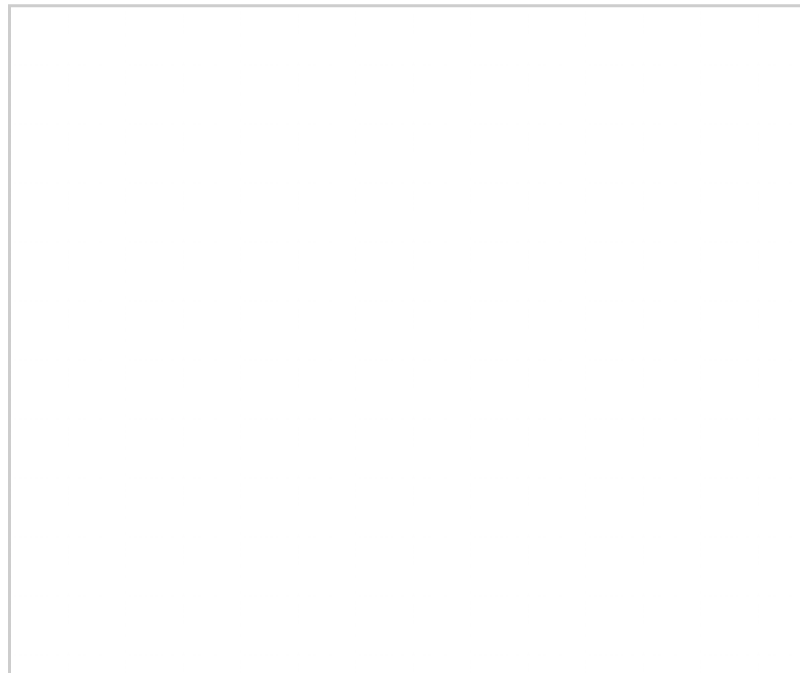
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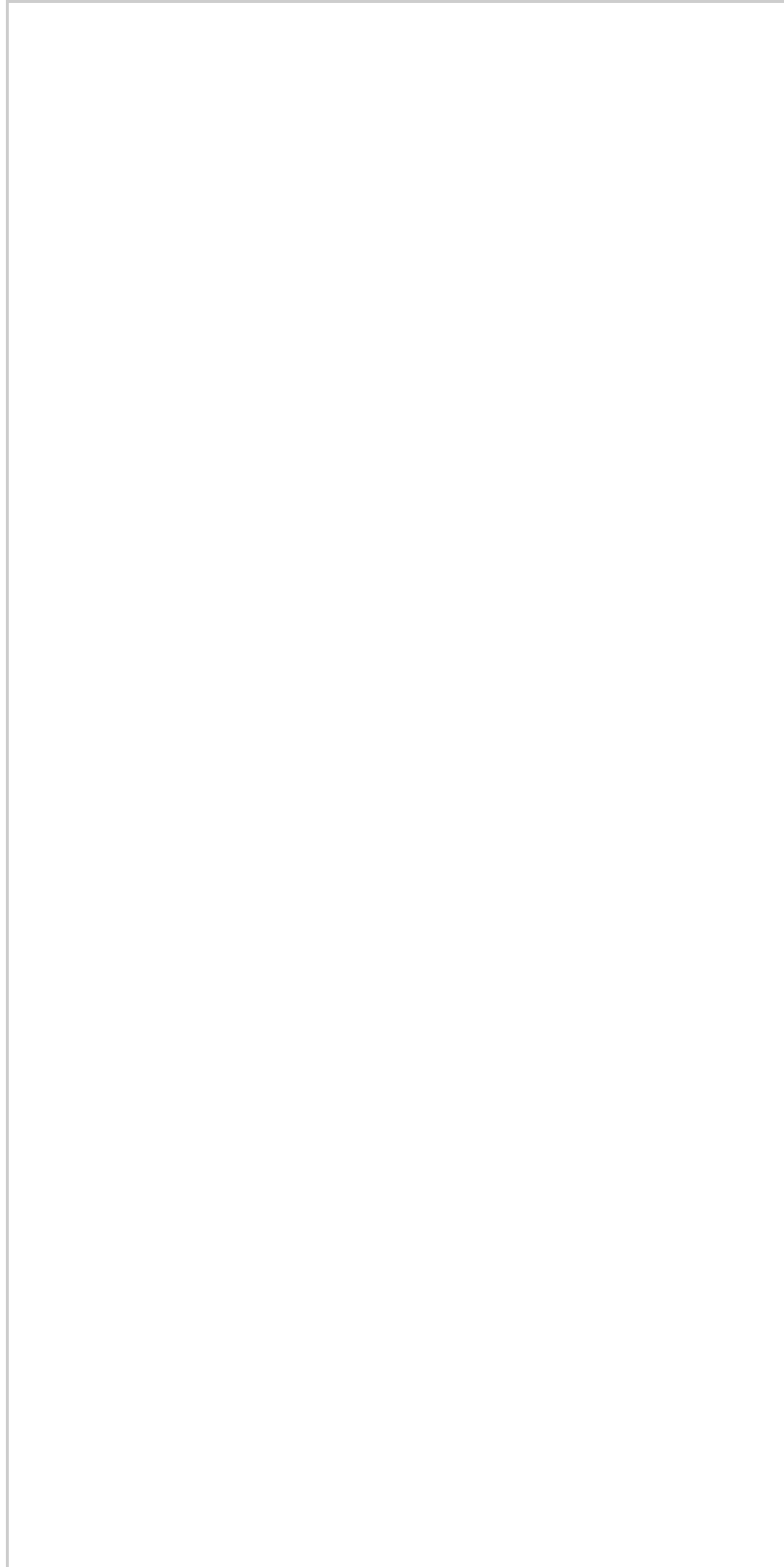
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