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Camp helps kids cope with Alzheimer's

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When the kids at camp started burying one of their own in the sand at his request, Mary Kay Baum turned it into a teachable moment.

"In what way is this like Alzheimer's," she asked, as the children patted down Mason Capps' arms and legs while he lay grinning in a heap of sand.

"It's hard to move for some people with Alzheimer's," answered one.

"And some people move a whole lot with Alzheimer's — and wander," Baum continued.

"And I'll add to that. Some of us have a hard time getting started to do something because we feel like we're stuck," she said.

Along with the typical summer-camp fare — from canoeing and rock-climbing to arts and crafts — the 14 kids at the weeklong "Time for Us" camp near Elkhorn in July came to learn about coping with memory-loss diseases such as Alzheimer's, a condition that has touched their lives by striking a parent, grandparent or family friend.

Organized through the South Central Wisconsin Alzheimer's Association and spearheaded in part by Baum, a long-time Madison activist and former public official who is now an advocate for dementia patients — she also has early-stage Alzheimer's — the camp is only the second of its kind in the U.S., drawing 11 boys and three girls this year from Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin, including five siblings from Madison.

Two of the children have both a parent and grandparent with memory loss, said Michele Armstrong, an outreach specialist for the Alzheimer's Association who led the group's discussions.

"We weren't sure at first if they were going to want to talk about Alzheimer's," Armstrong said. "But even the first night, we did an introductory activity and they had so many questions, right off the bat. The biggest question was, 'Am I going to get it?' And when we talked about early onset Alzheimer's," which can strike a person in middle age, "someone asked, 'Is that 15?'"

Baum and her sister Chris Baum Van Ryzin, both of whom have stalled their memory loss with medical treatment and lifestyle and dietary changes, showed the kids how to make popcorn using beneficial spices as an alternative to junk food laden with the MSG that Baum said worsens her dementia symptoms. They also created activities they hope to publish in a guide for others who want to launch a similar camp for kids.

"I say a prayer for (Alzheimer's) every night," said camper Matthew Walters, 13, as he finished drawing a picture of his grandmother's pet

bird on a canvas bag as part of a craft project. The bag would be a gift for a relative with dementia, he said.

"I pray for a cure for her, or anyone else who has Alzheimer's," he said, "or for anyone who knows someone who does."

FINDING HELP FOR ALZHEIMER'S

What it is: Alzheimer's is a progressive brain disease. According to the Alzheimer's Association, it is the most common form of dementia, "a general term for the loss of memory and other intellectual abilities serious enough to interfere with daily life."

To get help: The South Central Wisconsin Alzheimer's Association provides education and support for people with memory loss and those close to them. More information is online at www.alz.org/scwisc/ or by calling 232-3400 or the toll-free Alzheimer's Helpline at 800-272-3900. The Dane County "Memory Walk," a fundraiser, is scheduled for October 3.

Source: www.alz.org

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