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UCF students use Nintendo Wii to help people with memory loss

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Taryn Lamonettin, 23, a communicative sciences and disorders major at UCF, plays Nintendo Wii with Walter Braun at the Brain Fitness Club at First United Methodist Church of Winter Park. UCF students work with club members every Tuesday and Friday playing games that promote memory and coordination. (RAYMA JENKINS, SPECIAL TO THE SENTINEL / December 2, 2008)

The bowling ball is not even close to 10 pounds. It's as light as a remote control, but the techniques are similar: the arm swing needs follow-through, and a well-timed release of the trigger will help get that spare in the fifth frame.

Bowling with a [Nintendo Wii](#) is just one of the many games that UCF students play with members of the Brain Fitness Club, which serves 12 people who all have some form of memory impairment.

The joke among some of the members of the club is "now you can go play Wii with your grandkids," said Peggy Bargmann, the coordinator of the club, which meets at the First United Methodist Church of Winter Park.

"Many people have heard that doing crossword puzzles is good for your brain," Bargmann said. "Well, that's true, but if that's all you do for your brain, that's not going to be enough."

The Brain Fitness Club provides a variety of stimulation through board games, the Nintendo Wii, playing pool and ping-pong, and even line-dancing classes.

"That's what's really important for the brain, that there's a lot of novelty in learning," Bargmann said.

These activities promote cognitive stimulation, light physical exercise and socialization. UCF students come in and give one-on-one therapy sessions. They also provide a notebook full of mental stimulation exercises for every day of the week — jokingly referred to as homework.

Taryn Lamonettin, 23, is a communicative sciences and disorders undergraduate student at UCF and chose to intern at the Brain Fitness Club as part of her community internship class. She helps with activities such as the word games and plays Nintendo with the older adults.

Lamonettin developed good relationships with the members over this semester and said it's been a wonderful experience.

Her grandmother is in the beginning stages of developing dementia, although the diagnosis isn't official. Lamonettin doesn't get to see her often, but said she feels like she has a better understanding from this hands-on experience of how people with memory impairment live their lives and use their brains daily.

"From what I understand, it's not the medication that helps them to live a better life every day," Lamonettin said. "It's being around other people, especially going through the same thing, who can relate to them, and doing trivia games and doing puzzles. It helps them make connections."

One of the participants, Bob Tomcavage, is in his 80s. He loves music and dancing. He spoke about [Frank Sinatra](#) and the days when he'd go to dances with live bands.

"Really it's something that starts your day off right," Tomcavage said. "It's beautiful."

Nancy Gerrity, whose husband, Tom, was diagnosed with Alzheimer's in his early 50s, founded the program in August 2007.

She works full time at an engineering company, and Tom used to be at home by himself most of the day. He was still able to participate in activities, but there wasn't much that would offer him good mental stimulation, so Gerrity set out to create a place that would.

She said the program has benefited his attitude and happiness and that his mind is definitely sharper.

"He just loves coming here," Gerrity said. "It gives him a purpose."

The program is funded by private donations and grants, and the charge to participants is \$35 a day.

The Brain Fitness Club is looking for more funding to sustain and help the program grow in hopes of eventually being able to offer it to more members and possibly have more sites available, Gerrity said.

For more information on the Brain Fitness Club, call 407-927-4380.



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