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EDITOR'S PICK

Georgetown man tees off to help those battling dementia

By Lisa Rinaldi | Correspondent
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Josh Greenblatt watches as Jack Christian prepares to launch a shot.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO



GEORGETOWN — Local resident Josh Greenblatt learned firsthand that those in the early stages of dementia experience

significant losses.

Their sense of self, physical agility and memory may all be affected. Many who suffer from this cruel disease find themselves less able to enjoy once-cherished activities.

With that in mind, Greenblatt has made it his mission to return a sense of joy and companionship to experienced golfers whose skills and abilities are now compromised by the symptoms of dementia or Alzheimer's. Through Caddie Companions Initiative, Greenblatt is helping those who have been recently diagnosed stay active, connected, and engaged.

Greenblatt's organization offers caring, trained partners who are matched with aging golfers who may be struggling to continue to play the game they love.

Players should have previous golfing experience, possess the necessary physical abilities to complete a nine-hole course, and be able to complete activities of daily living independently. In addition, they must have the mental and social capacity to interact with a volunteer caddie/partner.

Each volunteer has completed the Alzheimer's Association three-hour online training, which covers topics such as person-centered dementia care and communication changes and dementia-related behavior. The service is free to participants.

Caddie Companions adheres to a careful screening process, which includes an intake to assess the golfer's ability to participate in the program, and a conversation with their care partner. Once those initial steps have been completed, a trip to a driving range is undertaken. Player and caddie move on to a nine-hole experience if the previous steps have gone well.

"My lived experience is really motivating me," Greenblatt said.

For much of Greenblatt's life, his bond with his father was solidified on the golf course. As time passed, Greenblatt noticed that his father required more help to get through a round of golf.

Like roughly six million others in the U.S., Greenblatt's father was diagnosed with dementia. When the two were able to play together, Greenblatt noticed that his father's mood improved, his anxiety decreased, and his overall well-being was better.

When Greenblatt's parents moved to Maine, his mother struggled, mostly unsuccessfully, to find golfers to play with her husband.

“My journey with my dad helped me to realize how many gaps there are in the continuum of care and services,” Greenblatt said.

From his father’s experience came the idea for Caddie Companions.

Long-term players often have deep-seated memories of their participation in a sport they played with skill and a sense of competence.

Partnering with a volunteer caddie provides an opportunity for social connection, a return to a valued identity, and engagement in physical activity. The Alzheimer’s Association website notes the importance of these factors in slowing disease progression, adding that recent studies indicate that exercise, in particular, may lower the risk of cognitive decline.

Annette Christian’s husband, Jack, experienced the benefits of Caddie Companions.

After connecting with Greenblatt at the Salisbury Senior Center, the two began golfing together, an activity Christian hadn't participated in for a number of years.

"It's just brought life back to my husband," Annette Christian said, adding that he hit the links at least once a week while she visited a friend or ran an errand. "Jack loved every minute of it."

Care partners such as Annette Christian also receive support from Caddie Companions. While their loved one is safe and engaged, the care partner experiences some much-needed respite from the stress and exhaustion of caring for a family member or

friend. The organization bolsters the network of support for both the golfer and his/her care partners.

“These pairings [of golfers and volunteers] allow care partners the space to care for themselves during a stressful time of life,” Greenblatt added.

Ultimately, Greenblatt said he wants Caddie Companions to help participants “hold onto who you are and do the things you love” while keeping stress low and dignity and joy foremost.

“Your world gets small with this disease,” Greenblatt said, “but I really am focusing on the positive experience I’m bringing to these individuals.”

Those interested in volunteering or donating to Caddie Companions can visit the website at www.caddiecompanions.org. The organization pays all golf-related expenses (\$150 for nine holes, \$75 for the driving range). Donations in any amount are accepted.

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