

## 5 YEARS OF COFFEE AND COMMUNITY

# A familiar rhythm

Morningstar Memory Cafe marks anniversary with musical celebration



By Evelyn Blower The Morning Call

As memory care patients, their caregivers and loved ones all cuddled their Morningstar Living mugs in the Advent Moravian Church sanctuary, the long-standing bimonthly tradition of the Morningstar Memory Cafe celebrated its fifth anniversary of providing dementia patients a cost- and stigma-free space to enjoy time together.

“It’s more gratifying for me than it is work,” said Mollie Sante, executive director of the Morningstar Senior Living Foundation. “It is such a delight to see people interfacing with each other, to see them greet one another when they come out and really have bonded.”

Twice a month on Thursdays, a dedicated group of individuals with memory issues, such as Alzheimer’s disease or dementia, and their partners all arrive at 10 a.m. at the church ready to cradle a cup of joe, juice, tea or water. The cafe offers educational and entertaining programming and resources, all free of charge.

On Thursday, they celebrated their fifth year. Though the program began during the COVID-19 pandemic and at one point had to shift to virtual, the cafe has consistently created a welcoming space whether in person or online. Now, nearly 40-50 people attend every other week, Sante said.

The special event consisted of small speeches by some of the volunteers and organizers of the memory cafe.

Dave Monaghan, a volunteer, called the group a “godsend.”

“There is no stigma here,” Monaghan said. “Everybody understands that, even the people that do have some form of dementia who are here, they’re all extremely comfortable. If you go out in a public setting it becomes very hard for them. Here, it’s total acceptance. It’s a relief to be able to do that in a social setting.”

U.S. Rep. Ryan Mackenzie also came and gave a few words at the event. The programming was concluded with a collaborative music activity, through the Therapeutic Arts Group. After handing out scarves, small cymbals and tambourines, the group all joined in song and percussion.

The cafe offers programming like music therapy, as well as art therapy and even outings. The Bethlehem Garden Club has collaborated with the group, helping to create centerpieces or other decorations during different seasons.

According to Morningstar Living Executive Director Susan Capobianco, 25,000 people are living with Alzheimer’s or related dementias in the Lehigh Valley. The concept of memory cafes, started in 1997 in the Netherlands, grew internationally and began to blossom about six years ago, when planning began for the Lehigh Valley’s first memory cafe.

While the Nazareth-based Morningstar Living community organizes the event at the church in Hanover Township, Northampton County, it is open to the public with reservations available online at [morningstarliving.org/senior-solutions/](http://morningstarliving.org/senior-solutions/).

Throughout the thrum of the lively group, folks chatted with their caregivers and surrounding neighbors. While sometimes attendees and volunteers hear the same stories, it’s always good to socialize and be a part of the group, Santee said.

“I think what motivates people is so many families have been impacted by a loved one with dementia,” Santee said. “They see the struggles and the loneliness that happens with people, and the social stigma that goes with people being forgetful and asking the same question over and over, or telling the same story over and over. In this environment, it’s just great to have other people to chat with.”