

Engaged Golf Tees Up Program for Those Living With Dementia Who Still Love the Game

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PINEHURST, N.C., Feb. 5, 2025 /PRNewswire/ -- Fore! It's common to hear that exclamation on one of the many courses across Moore County when a shot aimed for the fairway veers off course. Dementia, or brain change, too, may lead players off the course, and it may even result in the loss of their favorite pastime. Pinehurst residents Sue Wright and Lorelei Milan set a goal to change that and became dementia champions with The Engaged Brains Project, a positive, person-centered dementia care initiative led by board certified neuropsychologist Karen D. Sullivan and funded by The Foundation of FirstHealth's Reid Fellowship for Healthcare Transformation.

"The Foundation of FirstHealth is proud that Dr. Karen Sullivan is leading the Reid Fellowship for Healthcare Transformation and the work she is doing to create a person-centered dementia care pathway in our healthcare system and community," said Karen Fitch, the foundation's chair. "She has already touched several thousand people who were eager to learn about brain disease and how to be a more effective care partner. We are so thankful for her and these dementia champions who are leading the way in championing this very important work that will change lives in our own community and supporting our core purpose, 'to care for people.'"

"The Engaged Brains Project would not be a Moore County community program without a golf component," Sullivan added. "The game of golf is so much more than a final score of how many strokes it takes to get the ball in the hole. It is a deeply social game, connecting people within a community to one another through camaraderie and for the love of the game."

After attending an information session for The Engaged Brains Project last summer, both Wright and Milan felt compelled to join the effort.

"When I heard Dr. Sullivan speak about how people who are living with brain change often lose connections with everyday activities and how not participating in hobbies that once were a way of socializing with friends leads to isolation, I immediately thought of golf," Wright said. "Dr. Sullivan's message hit home with me, and I knew that I wanted to understand 'living with brain change.' Luckily for me, I was sitting at the same table as Lorelei, and when the session ended, we both looked at each other and said, 'Golf!'"

Milan added, "I have always watched Dr. Sullivan's YouTube videos and really liked her message, and a few years ago, a family member was tested and is now living with brain change, so I decided to go to the community event with the thought, 'I may learn something.' Sue and I talked about how many people we know who have stopped playing golf, and we agreed to partner up, and the rest is history. Not only do I have a great partner, but I also made a new friend whom I really enjoy and can count on."

Two other dementia champions of The Engaged Brains Project, Laurie Fabian and Lori Lee, also joined forces with Wright and Milan to work to make the Engaged Golf idea a reality. As dementia champions, they all completed the Positive Approach to Care® training and are sharing these learned skills with their Engaged Golf committee made up of nearly 20 community members, including John Petrovsky, education manager for the USGA Green Section.

"Golf has always been my passion," Petrovsky said, "and my career is rooted in the hard work that goes into maintaining a beautiful golf course. Over time, I've come to deeply appreciate golf's power to enhance both physical and mental well-being. Introduced to Engaged Golf through my wife's Alzheimer's research, I'm inspired by Pinehurst's unique opportunity to unite the community's love for golf with the mission of The Engaged Brains Project to make a meaningful difference for those living with brain change."

With the physical activity, mental stimulation and social interaction golf provides, Engaged Golf is organizing putting socials and small group outings for individuals and their families living with dementia or brain change. They intend to foster an environment where these individuals and their care partners can come together and keep playing, which immediately appealed to Pinehurst residents Bonnie Becker-Jones and her husband Clive, who are living with her recent dementia diagnosis, remain avid golfers and plan to participate in Engaged Golf events and putting socials.

"I see this as a great opportunity," Becker-Jones said, "to reunite with friends and make new friends with similar brain change challenges."

"Keeping all of our neighbors involved in golf will require that we build new 'cognitive bridges' that reduce barriers to playing, like needing to remember the score at each hole," Sullivan added. "As two examples, Engaged Golf intends to provide pocket scorekeepers to all Moore County golf courses and educate fellow golfers on how to more skillfully accept a fellow player's changing memory or language."

As part of that cognitive bridge and to help further reduce the stigma associated with dementia and brain change, Engaged Golf has already created a handy card to equip these golfers with something they can easily and discreetly share with other players on the course

to explain their situation. It includes the statement, "Playing golf is changing for me. I enjoy playing but am living with brain changes that make some parts of my golf game harder. I apologize in advance if something is said or done that surprises or distresses you. I am trying my best. –Thank you."

Additionally, the group designed a Golf Assist card for players that identifies the obstacles—other than bunkers—golfers with brain change may display, such as: challenges following rules, forgetting the score or who is up next, repeating themselves or stories, or needing help finding the ball or choosing the right club. The flip side of the card further provides suggestions on what to say or do when playing with other golfers living with brain change, including:

"The brain benefits of hobbies, like golf, are not merely social," Sullivan explained. "There is strong scientific support for the power of hobbies to also boost brainpower on the cellular level. Lifelong learning, defined as a commitment to mastering skills and deepening interests over time, has been shown to increase the number of connections between different parts of the brain and encourage the growth of new cells in our memory centers. A stronger and more connected brain can better withstand the effects of age-related brain diseases, like Alzheimer's disease, before it starts to manifest symptoms, such as short-term memory loss. One of the best ways to contribute to your cognitive reserve is to remain an active participant in your hobbies. The longer you've had the hobby, the stronger the brain networks are that support it. This is why returning to a previous hobby, even if it has been years since you did it, is a powerful brain enhancer."

Based upon that principle of brain enhancement and better quality of life, Engaged Golf wants to reach our Moore County neighbors who love golf and are experiencing brain change, and raise further awareness by inviting them to the group's inaugural event on Wednesday, Feb. 19 at The USGA Experience and World Golf Hall of Fame (WGHOF) in Pinehurst. Attendees will experience a tour of the facility and hear guest speakers, including Dana Casson, president, The Foundation of FirstHealth; Donna Andrews, Pine Needles Golf Club lead instructor and former LPGA player; neuropsychologist Karen D. Sullivan, PhD, ABPP; John Petrovsky, USGA; and Maggie Lagle, USGA Museum/WGHOF, who will present historic golf items and WGHOF inductees' lockers.

"The Foundation of FirstHealth is proud to support The Engaged Brains Project and its vision to enhance the lives of those living with brain change and the families and loved ones who care for them," Casson said. "Engaged Golf exemplifies the spirit of our community, using the game of golf to foster connection, joy and inclusion for individuals and their families. I'm excited to be a part of this inaugural event and to celebrate the power of collaboration in creating programs that truly make a difference."

"The Engaged Golf project is who we have always been as a community," Sullivan added.

"Pinehurst is the home of golf and built with the intention of providing its residents with a healthy and happy lifestyle, where the very best things in life are easily accessible. We just want those same benefits to be extended to our neighbors living with brain change."

Registration is required for the Feb. 19 Engaged Golf USGA-WGHOF event, as space is limited to golfers living with brain change and their care partners. Visit <https://engaged-golf.youcanbook.me> to sign up. For more information on Engaged Golf's upcoming putting socials and events, email EngagedGolf@gmail.com.

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