

New Drug & Tender Care Slow Disease

FOUR YEARS AGO Sarina Mascheroni was quickly losing her ability to communicate. Her Alzheimer's disease had advanced to a stage when patients begin to lose their ability to care for themselves and can't remem-

ber such basic things as the current year or their former occupation. Her husband, John, recalls that his wife at times appeared to be no longer able to call him by his name. "She was clearly going downhill," he recalls. Sarina's inability to remember her husband's name was perhaps the greatest blow to John because they had known each other almost 60 years, ever since they attended The High School of Music and Art, a

celebrated school in New York City that has nurtured the talents of many budding artists. The high school sweethearts married, and over the years their marriage blossomed into a lasting partnership. At one point

(memantine), which Sarina began taking four years ago. The only FDA-approved drug for the treatment of moderate to severe Alzheimer's, it works by blocking the activity of a brain chemical called glutamate. "There is no question that she stopped declining when she was put on the Namenda," says John.

A recent study led by School of Medicine physicians showed that the drug could slow the mental and physical deterioration of patients in the later stages of Alzheimer's for at least

one year. In the moderate to severe stages, patients have trouble dressing and bathing; many can no longer make a cup of coffee or tea. The study, published in the *Archives of Neurology*, was led by Barry Reisberg, M.D., Professor of Psychiatry, who is also Sarina's physician. "This study demonstrates that it is possible to alleviate some of the cognitive and functional losses associated with Alzheimer's, even at these stages, for a signifi-

cant time period," says Dr. Reisberg. Patients in the study showed a significantly slower-than-expected rate of decline in a test of their ability to perform daily activities, and in other tests that measure cognition and behavior. But the drug by itself cannot account for all of Sarina's ability to remain engaged in her life. Both her husband and Dr. Reisberg credit an individualized program of psychosocial care provided by Dr. Sunnie A. Kenowsky, Clinical Instructor in the Department of Psychiatry, who with Dr. Reisberg co-directs the Fisher Alzheimer's Disease Education and Resources Program at NYU. Sarina is partly the impetus for a study in which patients receive Namenda as well as individualized comprehensive care, which includes home visits and participation in exercise and cognitive stimulation programs. (To enroll in the study, contact its coordinator, Robyn Waters, at 212-263-8088.)

Dr. Kenowsky introduced Sarina to puzzles and flash cards, and she came up with the idea of filling in the outlines of drawings. Sarina's husband took the idea one step further, and made outlines of printings by Matisse, van Gogh, and other artists for Sarina to paint. He also created Christmas cards of her work. The painting, especially, revived Sarina, says John. "She hums and whistles when she does these paintings. It has increased her sense of self-esteem, has made her feel better about herself."



SARINA MASCHERONI AND HER HUSBAND, JOHN

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they established a furniture design business together. Then, in 1998, Sarina was diagnosed with Alzheimer's.

Today John speaks glowingly of his 73-year-old wife, who has moderately severe Alzheimer's. She still readily laughs at his jokes and, most tellingly, she also remembers his name. "It's quite obvious that her demeanor has changed for the better," says John. He credits Sarina's turnaround, in part, to a drug called Namenda

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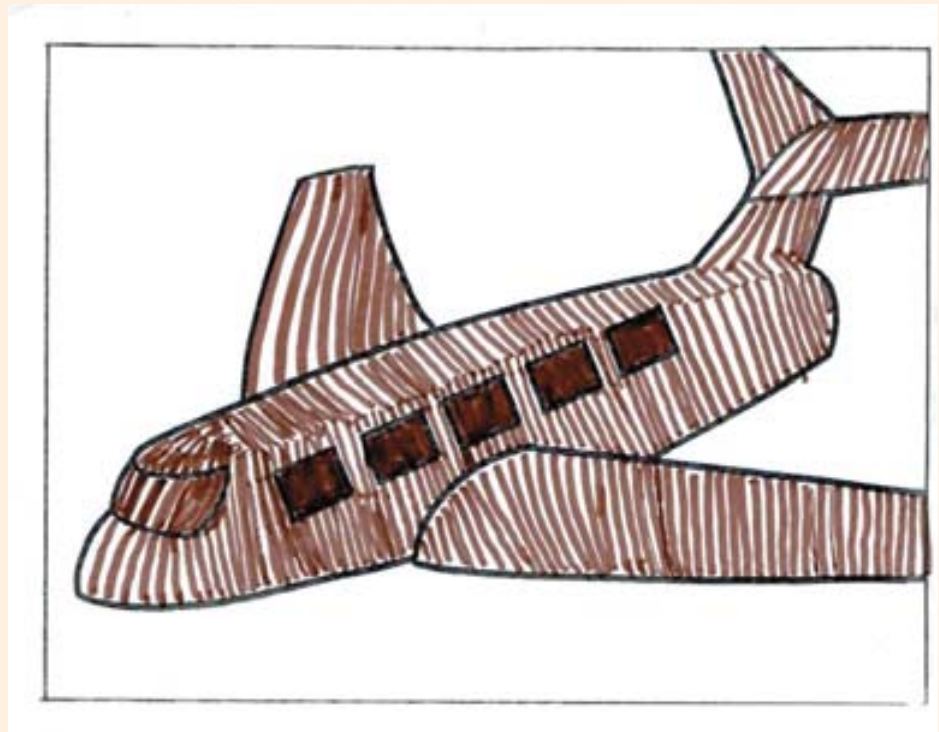
Dr. Reisberg says that Sarina “has turned a disability into an ability.” Dr. Kenowsky agrees, adding that the individualized comprehensive care program enhances the remaining strengths of people with Alzheimer’s, helping them to function despite their limitations. The research project also trains caregivers to interact with the Alzheimer’s patients. “The individualized management program brought out Sarina’s gift for painting,” she says. “The drug by itself cannot do this.”

Certainly the loving attention of Sarina’s husband has helped her maintain her dignity. John says that he has taken over the job of cooking, which is something he loves to do. Sarina is still able to use a fork and knife, and they have dinner at home together almost every night. Occasionally they go out to restaurants. “I’m not going to hide her from the world,” says John. ●

— Marjorie Shaffer



Alzheimer’s disease is the most common form of dementia affecting people over 65. More than 4 million Americans—1 in 10 people over 65 and nearly half of those over 85—are afflicted.



As a former graphic designer, Sarina fills in the outlines of drawings as part of a comprehensive therapy program for Alzheimer’s patients that capitalizes on their individual talents. Examples of Sarina’s work are shown here.

