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ARTS

Rapid City artist explores the journey of dementia in Washington Pavilion exhibit



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In the exhibit “Take Me to Your Moon: Journeys Into the World of Dementia” at the Washington Pavilion, sculpted figures embrace, rest with their eyes closed, lean on each other, examine the world around them and stare at their own reflection.

The artist, Yoko Sugawara, also known by her artist name “Tenyoh,” hopes to create connections between friends, caregivers and people with dementia through the exhibit.

The title was inspired by the Ted Talk “Reconsider Dementia” by Vibeke Drevesen Bach, which described the disease as a journey from the earth to the moon.

“I was trying to not to be too sentimental about dementia,” Sugawara said. “I want people to see humanness, as we go through, you know, ups and downs. And try to take things positively and reflect upon on their own journey as well.”

The project began in 2021 when a gallery in Nebraska offered her the opportunity for a show. Sugawara accepted and asked her former art teacher to do a joint exhibit with her.

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Sugawara said her art teacher was hesitant. She told Sugawara that she had dementia, and she had begun to show the symptom of forgetfulness. But eventually

her teacher agreed, saying, “I think it’s going to be good for me. I want to do it with you.”

Because her former art teacher is now in memory care and cannot share her story herself, Sugawara calls her by the pseudonym “Daisy” to protect her privacy.

The two collaborated together on the first exhibit in the series, which was displayed in 2022 at the Prairie Arts Center in North Platte, Nebraska.

“Dementia has not been expressed often in art,” Sugawara told Daisy. “Just create whatever you feel.”

More: [Sugawara's website](#)

Although Daisy can no longer create art, Sugawara has continued the series through her exhibit at the Washington Pavilion. The exhibit opened earlier this year, with an artist talk and reception, and runs through mid-November.

Sugawara asked Leslie Morrow, Executive Director of the South Dakota Alzheimer's Association, to speak with her at the reception in May.

The South Dakota Alzheimer's Association offers dementia educational resources, care consultations, support groups and a 24/7 support hotline.

Morrow said that when she saw the “Take Me to Your Moon” exhibit for the first time, she was struck by the haunting beauty of the sculptures and the descriptions Sugawara wrote for each piece.

“Tenyoh is putting in artistic form what so many of the families we serve are experiencing,” Morrow said. “She really has a knack for drilling down to what this disease is, how it impacts someone, and yet she always finds the beauty in it, in a disease where so much is lost and there's so much pain.”

During the artist reception, Morrow gave simple tips on how to be a better friend or caregiver to someone living with Alzheimer’s or dementia.

She it's helpful to meet a person with dementia where they're at in their own reality. One way to do this is therapeutic fibbing, or bending the truth to reduce the anxiety of a person with dementia.

But the most important thing Morrow and Sugawara wanted everyone at the reception to know was that they weren't alone.

"This disease comes with a lot of isolation for the person living with it and for their caregiver, because of the stigma still surrounding Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia," Morrow said. "Once you become more comfortable with how to have conversations with someone with dementia, what to do if they ask you the same question five times [...] it lessens the isolation. It makes people want to be around others more often, and that is such a huge relief."

Erin Castle, Washington Pavilion Exhibit Curator, said she often sees people leaving Sugawara's exhibit with tears in their eyes.

"[Sugawara] tried to create insights about life and aging and the importance of those human connections through these sculptures," Castle said. "Art is meant to move and to make you think more deeply about your life and about the lives of others, and find that common ground. And I think she's very well achieved that."

Sugawara said both of her grandmothers had dementia, and while creating the exhibit, her 87-year-old mother was beginning to experience early signs of dementia, such as forgetfulness.

Her artwork at the Washington Pavilion expresses the reactions to the disease that she saw in her own family and in Daisy's friends and family.

"Artwork is often strong if it becomes personal," she said.

Sugawara grew up in Japan in the 1960s, where she studied brush and ink technique, although she said her parents didn't encourage her art. Sugawara and

her twin sister always longed to leave their town in Japan as soon as they graduated high school.

She moved to upstate New York in 1985 and attended Binghamton University, learning computer science. And in 1995, she graduated from Oglala Lakota College Nursing Program.

From 2004 to 2005, Sugawara said she volunteered for Doctors Without Borders in Abkhazia. She also traveled to Japan to help with recovery efforts after the earthquake and tsunami of 2011.

Sugawara said working with patients around the world showed her the universality of the human condition.

“No matter where you live, humans are humans, so that's what I'm expressing in a way. Commonalities, both strength and weakness that I find in humans, regardless of races or cultures people are in,” Sugawara said. “The dementia series is exactly that, because the theme is so universal.”

More: [Dell Rapids small business opens storefront showcasing area ‘artists and makers’](#)

In 2012, Sugawara began working as a full-time artist in South Dakota and switched to working with ceramics. Her art teacher Daisy was also experimenting with ceramics at the time, and they attended an art workshop in Montana together.

Sugawara would often take her art to Daisy and ask for critique.

“Usually, she encouraged me to continue what I'm doing,” Sugawara said. “So you know, you can see that a teacher and student relationship moved to friendship, friendship as artists, helping each other.”

In 2018, Daisy visited one of Sugawara’s joint art exhibits, titled “Life Dimensions,” at the Dahl Arts Center in Rapid City. Afterward, she wrote Sugawara a note.

“I must tell you again how very wonderful your work is. You have worked tirelessly. You have listened, looked, experimented, and created work that is totally yours. What a fantastic achievement. Congratulations! Take joy in your success. You are not only a wonderful artist, but also a wonderful person.”

Sugawara cried when she read the note. And then she dialed Daisy’s number.

Five years later, at the end of 2023, Sugawara sat with her art teacher and friend. She and Daisy had gone on a walk and eaten a picnic lunch at the assisted living home where Daisy lived.

“What else can we do?” Daisy asked.

Sugawara said it was difficult to do art projects with Daisy, because Daisy had trouble following instructions and could get easily discouraged. But Sugawara still wanted to try.

“Do you want to try making clay turtles with me?” she asked her former art instructor, bringing out the clay.

But it didn’t work. Sugawara said Daisy couldn’t follow the hand movements to make the clay figures.

Until Sugawara placed her hands on top of Daisy’s, moving her art teacher’s hands to make the right movement. Soon they gained momentum and Sugawara let go. The teacher who had given Sugawara strength to keep doing art now relied on Sugawara’s strength to make a clay turtle.

“Working with people with dementia, you learn a lot about, to me, patience, number one, and also creative approach,” Sugawara said. “I always wonder, what will be the best way to bring what little that Daisy has and bring it out in a visual form?”

More: [How a Sioux Falls art gallery and tattoo parlor is trying to end student lunch debt](#)

Sugawara said that Alzheimer's and dementia are still "hush-hush words" in the United States.

"People do not want to discuss what's going on in their family," she said.

By bringing attention to Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia, Sugawara hopes to lessen the isolation the disease can bring. And through working on dementia-related art, Sugawara said she has become more intentional in her own relationships.

Sugawara said she reaches out to her mother more often, and she teaches clay hand-building classes for adults of all abilities at the Suzie Cappa Arts Center. She wants to make teaching adults with special needs her specialty.

One of the pieces in the Washington Pavilion exhibit is called "Lift Them Up." The sculpture shows a man and woman leaning on each other, eyes closed.

In the description of the piece, Sugawara wrote:

"In Blue Zones (regions of longevity), dementia is rare. If such persons are located, the symptoms are mild. Social supports are believed to play a major role in this.*On the other hand, about 1 in 9 Americans (age 65 and older) has Alzheimer's. Most live at home with a family member. As the disease progresses, the stress and isolation take a toll on the health of both caregivers and receivers.** What can we do to combat this? The only answer I have found is to make time to reach out. I am not good at it, but I am going to try.* [TED Radio Hour: "Living Longer...And Better" by Dan Buettner](#)** [Alzheimer Association: Alzheimer Disease Facts and Figures](#)"

The "Take Me to Your Moon: Journeys Into the World of Dementia" exhibit will be displayed at the Washington Pavilion through Nov. 17.

