



The S.O.A.R. Program takes people to new heights!

By Marigrace Becker, MSW

This summer, the UW Memory & Brain Wellness Center added a new outdoor opportunity to its menu of education, support and social programs. S.O.A.R., which stands for Shared Outdoor Adventures for Resilience, brought together 23 people with younger onset Alzheimer's and family members to complete a low ropes course in a supportive team environment. Activities blended physical challenge, mutual reliance and creative solution-seeking – such as walking along a cable suspended 3 feet off the ground while leaning on a friend's shoulder, or balancing a large-scale teeter totter as a group.

"It was incredible to see both the individual and team strengths during the activities. Everyone had something to contribute in each challenge," says Dr. Carolyn Parsey, PhD, a neuropsychologist at the UW Memory & Brain Wellness Center, who helped design the program.

Through this tangible experience of overcoming challenge, group members reinforced their strengths and built confidence that could transfer back to their daily life. Meanwhile, they nurtured their relationship with their family by relying on each other in new, outside-the-box situations.

"We really liked it," said one care partner Andy. "It was super fun to work with other people to solve problems. And it was wonderful to have lots of different experiences."

"Oh yeah – it's all of it!" his wife Anne agreed.

S.O.A.R. was developed by Dr. Carolyn Parsey and program manager for community education and impact Marigrace Becker, led by professional facilitators from Northwest Teambuilding, and received financial support from Jefferson House and The Inn at Belle Harbour.

The ropes course facilitators repeatedly applauded the keen ability of team members to leave ego behind and help each other out – an ability that may have emerged during the memory loss journey.

"We have a word for a team that is this in tune with each other – we call them 'high functioning,'" one facilitator noted.

At the core of S.O.A.R. is the idea that many strengths remain in the midst of memory loss – including social connectedness, appreciation for the natural world, and physical ability. With the initial pilot program off the ground – literally – the next step will be evaluating the program's impact and considering possible expansion to new activities, venues, and audiences. •

> Would you like to stay in the loop about what's next for the S.O.A.R. program? Contact mbecker1@uw.edu.