Connecting through design for dementia patients

October 8 2010, By Ted Boscia

Hannah Kim '09, left, and Jessica Haswell '09 build the furniture.

Frustrated by their inability to communicate with their parents with dementia, two Human Ecology professors are using custom-built furniture and digital photos to help families connect with loved ones suffering from Alzheimer's and other brain diseases.

With a team of 10 students, Paul Eshelman and Franklin Becker, professors of design and environmental analysis (DEA), constructed a "conversation corner" -- a padded, high-backed bench to help nursing home residents and their families block out surrounding distractions during visits. They also designed a portable, wood-finished stand on which dementia patients can view digital pictures that evoke happy memories. Finally, the research team taught family members how to interact "in the moment" and overcome communication lapses associated with short-term memory loss.

Constance E. Cook '41, Law '43, right, and her daughter Catherine Cook try out the conversation corner at an Ithaca nursing home.

In initial studies of the Family Visit Program over the past three years, supported by $75,000 in federal Hatch funds, the researchers have seen largely positive responses from 10 residents, 13 family members and nine workers at two Ithaca nursing homes.

"We know from existing research and personal experience that visiting loved ones with Alzheimer's disease, dementia or other short-term memory loss can be an emotional minefield," said Becker, who first tried the program with his mother. "This stress can cut short visits or even discourage people from coming at all. But we also know that family visits have great therapeutic value for dementia patients, so we're trying to create the conditions for more rewarding visits for everyone involved."

The program is unique, Eshelman said, in using design and physical setting to try to ease family-resident interactions. The conversation corner and photo stand have been installed in large, communal areas of nursing homes, locations where dementia patients would normally be sidetracked by nearby activity. But the intimate space helps to focus

attention on the photos, and visitors can control the flow of images with a remote, an advantage over scrapbooks, which can be bulky and have pictures scattered across many pages.

"Several times I have seen tender moments between family members and residents -- an elderly couple with their arms around each other, a granddaughter nuzzling up to her grandmother -- that were brought about because of the design of the space," Eshelman said.

Even before the first visit, Becker said, families have seen benefits. As they gather to select photos -- usually about 30 -- to share, it's a way for family members to bond and "reconnect with their loved ones," he said.

The research team is seeking additional funding to continue usability studies in local nursing homes to further refine their prototype and build on graduate theses in the field of DEA by Sarah Blau '07, M.A. '09, and Hannah Kim '09, M.A. '10. Already, participant feedback has led them to scale back a large canopy that hung above the conversation corner because it intimidated residents.

"Dementia didn't erase my mother, I just had to work harder to get to the essence of her," said Eshelman, who knows the pain of caring for loved ones with dementia from his regular visits to his late parents at a nursing home in Ohio. "Even right up to the end, she was able to make emotional connections with me. My challenge is to create a design that makes it easier to call up those kinds of moments."

Provided by Cornell University