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Brain Awareness Week features smart advice on mind matters
By Craig Howard – Spokane Valley News Managing Editor



Kathy Ward skipped past most of the technical jargon during her keynote presentation at the end of Brain Awareness Week last Friday to present a simple message – take care of your brain and your brain will take care of you.

A psychologist and gerontologist who has authored four books, Ward did provide a helpful overview of basic neuroscience including insight on the parts of the brain that are affected by Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia. In sum, however, her presentation was like a pre-game motivational talk with a game plan centered around keeping the mind active and alert.

"The better you can develop your brain now, the better it's going to function for the rest of your life as long as you keep nurturing it," Ward said. Ward spoke to a group at Spokane Community College on March 16, the last day of a week that included events and activities promoting brain health. Just as walking and jogging promote physical well-being, mental exercise – from reading books to learning a new language – help the mind stay fit, Ward said. Even those with Alzheimer's can restore mental health with the proper approach, Ward added.

"My quest is to prove that the brain can be rehabilitated," she said.

A number of research projects support Ward's claims including a report in the New England Journal of Medicine which found that activities like reading, crossword puzzles, dancing and board games all contributed to lower rates of dementia.

At the UCLA Center on Aging, director Gary Small promotes mental exercise as a way to avoid the onset of Alzheimer's. In his book, "The Memory Prescription," Small describes how "mental aerobics" help keep the brain in shape.

"If you keep your brain cells active, it improves their efficiency," Small said. "You develop what we believe is a cognitive reserve."

A 2005 report published in Science magazine provided encouragement for Alzheimer's patients and their families hoping to reverse the effects of the disease. Researchers found that by reducing levels of amyloid plaque – a sticky substance that has a clogging effect on the brain – memory not only stopped deteriorating, it improved.

Last year, a University of Washington study showed that regular exercise among seniors improved blood flow to the brain while reducing the amount of amyloid plaque.

Pat Freeman, manager of the seniors program for Community Colleges of Spokane's Institute of Extended Learning, helped Ward coordinate the inaugural Brain Awareness Week, organizing an art exhibit and opening ceremony at the Southside Senior Activity Center. Freeman said seniors who continue their education through the CCS classes and other programs feel "healthier, richer and more connected."

"All of us are in the process of aging," Freeman said. "There are so many ways we can keep ourselves vital and healthy."

Freeman tells the story of one senior who joined a writing group at the Southside center and ended up writing his autobiography. The creative challenge of the project and the social benefits of the program became an integral part of his weekly routine, Freeman said.

"That class extended his life by 10 years," she said. "It really kept him involved."

Staying active and eating right are also important factors in maintaining a healthy brain, Ward said. Each day should include plenty of fruits and vegetables, exercise, natural light and an emphasis on good posture and a positive attitude.

"Poor nutrition and a sedentary lifestyle are deadly for the brain," Ward said. Healthy foods, especially those high in antioxidants, are also thought to combat memory loss. The list includes salmon, nuts, boysenberries, blueberries, seeds, brussel sprouts and broccoli.

Other keys include a steady supply of water, proper amounts of sleep and a daily account of the steps being taken to achieve wellness. Ward described the benefits of a "wellness journal" which tracks "the things you are doing to better your body, mind and spirit."

"Invest the time thinking about what you can do better," she said. Ward moved to Spokane six months ago after spending 13 years in the Washington, D.C., area where she worked with seniors and Alzheimer's patients. While there, she formed an organization called World Elder Land and joined the National Alzheimer's Association Speaker's Bureau. In 2004, she was named a Universal Peace Ambassador.

Since starting World Brain Awareness Week through WEL three years ago, the event is now observed in Spain, The Netherlands, Colombia and Venezuela. Ward said she hopes to make the program part of the annual calendar in Spokane.

"The whole idea is to educate people about how wonderful the brain is and how we can preserve and nurture it," Ward said. "When you start educating and explain the basics, people get it."

Want to find out more?

Kathy Ward will be speaking on the topic of whole-person wellness on **Wednesday, April 4, from 10 a.m. to noon at CenterPlace at Mirabeau Point, 2426 N. Discovery Place in Spokane Valley.** On **Tuesday, May 8, from noon to 2:30 p.m., Ward will give a presentation at Sacred Heart's Center for Faith and Healing, 101 W. 8th.** Healthcare professionals, elders and everyone are invited to register. For more information, visit www.kathyjward.com/blog. Other helpful Web sites include the Alzheimer's site at www.alz.org and www.elderrecreationtherapy.com. To find out more about Community Colleges of Spokane Institute for Extended Learning, call 533-4756.