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Northumbria stages play to explore the impact of dementia

Northumbria University, Newcastle is set to welcome home a critically-acclaimed play that explores the impact of dementia.

Bringing to life extensive research conducted by Northumbria academics, working in partnership with Edinburgh University, Jack and Jill & The Red Postbox encourages the audience to think about how they live and work alongside those in their communities who have a diagnosis of dementia.

The fictionalised play, written, performed and produced by Skimstone Arts, is

inspired by findings from a piece of research undertaken by Northumbria and Edinburgh Universities, working with families in Northumberland. The research was carried out by Dr Cathy Bailey, Senior Research Fellow and Dr Catherine Gibb, Senior Lecturer, both at Northumbria University, and Professor Charlotte Clarke at Edinburgh University, with contributions from a number of colleagues.

It is hoped that the story will support both families and healthcare professionals who may be dealing with some of the issues raised.

Dr Bailey said: “Colleagues and I led on a significant research project that explored everyday tensions between the notions of risk and resilience for some people living with dementia in North East communities.

“Often, it is everyday activities such as going to the hairdresser or the post office that can present considerable challenges for people living with dementia. Such challenges may be as much to do with how others communicate and engage with someone with dementia, as they are about the person themselves.

“We felt that the issues raised through the research deserved a life beyond a written report. Working closely with Claire Webster Saaremets, Artistic Director at Skimstone Arts, we felt that we could have a greater and more positive impact on how we deal with dementia, a condition that affects some 800,000 people in the UK.”

The play, which won critical acclaim at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in August, follows the story of Jack and Jill (played by North East actors Sarah Kemp and John Cobb from Théâtre Sans Frontières) and their daughter Lucy (played by Skimstone Arts Artistic Director / writer, Claire Webster-Saaremets). Their lives are turned upside down when Jill is diagnosed with dementia and they begin to encounter considerable challenges day-to-day.

Following its performance at Northumbria University on 30th October, the production will return to Edinburgh as part of the ESRC (Economic Social and Research Council) Festival of Social Sciences on Saturday 2nd November. It is anticipated that future performances will then be scheduled to inform the training of social workers.

Dr Bailey added: “This is an important event for Northumbria as it builds on our long-term ambition to achieve Dementia Friendly Community status, identifying us as having high awareness of the implications of dementia and being more inclusive for those living with the condition. This status would be a first for the region and we are delighted that we have the will and support of organisations such as the Alzheimer Society and the North East Dementia Action Alliance.

“With Prime Minister David Cameron’s 2012 ‘Dementia Challenge’, there is a political will to make life better for people living with dementia. Additionally, initiatives such as the Alzheimer Society’s ‘Dementia Friends’ training aim to give people an awareness of how they can make a positive difference.”

The original research and premier performance was funded by NHS North of England Commissioning Support Unit. The Northumbria University performance is supported by Northumbria Performing Arts.

For more information about Health at Northumbria University, visit www.northumbria.ac.uk/hces

Anyone requiring further information about living with dementia should contact the Alzheimer Society in Newcastle on 0191 274 2727.

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