

How one Remarkable Woman made a Difference



On a cold November afternoon in 2021, Sr. Mary Threadgold who is originally from Dublin, flew to Oslo, Norway to attend a very special event. It was a ceremony to mark the completion of the first Sonas programme to train health care practitioners in Norway. All of the materials were translated into the Norwegian language and the songs used were taken from their own culture. The programme was designed and developed by Sr. Mary in 1990 with the support of the Sisters of Charity, and is now widely used in nursing homes and care centres throughout The Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and the UK. These are multi-sensory sessions that help the health care workers and those living with dementia to connect with each other. They do this by unlocking all of the five senses and facilitating communication. The benefits are enormous for all of those who take part in the Sonas Programme.

For her wonderful work in creating this programme Sr. Mary was presented with a gift by her Norwegian healthcare hosts. This gift was a beautiful piece of broken ceramic pottery. The broken piece had been repaired and joined back together with gold. This is known in Japan as Kintsugi, which poetically translates to 'golden joinery'. It is a centuries-old Japanese art of fixing broken pottery. The adhesive is made from a special type of tree sap mixed with gold powder. The significance of this particular gift was that the broken bowl represented the person living with dementia, the ceramic piece soldered with gold was the Sonas programme which helped to bring a greater wholeness to the person through the medium of communication.



The full name of the programme is Sonas aPc. Sonas is an Irish word which means 'well being, joy, contentment'. The aPc part stands for 'activating potential for communication'. Indeed research has shown that participants benefit from the programme in a variety of ways. They have an enhanced sense of well being and they are more likely to participate in activities.

The idea for the Sonas programme was born from Sr. Mary's work as a speech and language therapist many years ago. Sr. Mary was working as a therapist with young people with significant cognitive impairment. As a result of these cognitive difficulties many of these young people had little or no communication skills. In an effort to improve their communication, Sr. Mary put her fine mind and training to work on creating a method that would later be proven to achieve results.

Several years later Sr. Mary found herself working with 'Friends of the Elderly' in Dublin. She noticed that many older residents were not communicating with others or engaging in any activities. She decided that her programme could be beneficial for these elderly people. After further development and adaptations the programme was ready to be tested. Sr. Mary then had the programme tested and validated.



This multi-sensory programme is very beneficial for participants. It helps to improve mood, enhances well-being and encourages communication and engagement in activities. Demand for the programme has grown over the years and courses have been run in Northern Ireland, Scotland, the Channel Islands, the UK, USA and Australia. There are now more than 450 Sonas Licensed Practitioners in Ireland, who are trained to carry out the programme. Sonas sessions are carried out in about 50% of nursing homes and day centres nationwide.

Sr. Mary would like to see the programme rolled out to as many people living with dementia as possible, both in Ireland and abroad. This is a wonderful programme that can enhance the lives of those who live with dementia.

If you are interested in finding out more about the programme please contact Michelle O'Hara: email: michelle@engagingdementia.ie.

