

An Introduction to Activities

This book describes activities for adults—particularly for elders. It is designed for activity professionals and caregivers who seek storytelling and activity techniques. Intended as a resource for caregiving of normal and high-functioning adults (Chapter 2) and for those with moderate-to-low cognitive functioning (Chapter 3), this book presents methods, ideas, and stories. Themes and topics include activities of adult life, inter-generational episodes, and reminiscence. A primary focus is on adulthood after mid-life, but many of the stories include multiple ages: from childhood, through mid-life, and into the later years.

The focus of the book is on storytelling—a very important part of adulthood and of the aging experience. **However, this book is not just a collection of stories. It also includes techniques for guiding elder activities that provide enjoyment while supporting memory function.** These methods are based on Lauren’s research in the long-term care setting and the studies of other gerontologists. They are also rooted in both our experiences working in the field of gerontology, and in Virginia’s background, which includes caregiving research.

About using memory and problem-solving tasks to help thinking and remembering (what scientists call “cognitive maintenance and enrichment activities”), hard science has not caught up with peoples’ desires to build better activities, so that elders “think better for longer.” Yet, a little bit of research does indicate directions for growth (e.g., Seifert & Baker, 2009). Among those directions is an approach to activities called “Practicing Against Decline” (or **PADding**; Seifert, 2009). It provides a foundation for some of the tasks in this book. In the PADding technique, we build a “scaffold” that supports better functioning (like using a large sign that is posted in a main hallway to signal an important event; about “scaffolding,” see Vygotsky, 1926/1997). Then, we use scaffolding cues, paired with practice that is once-per-week over at least six weeks (Baker & Seifert, 2007; Seifert & Baker, 2009; Seifert & Jones, 2011). PADding provides a chance for better remembering, and some people have shown modest benefits from the approach (Seifert, 2007a; Seifert, 2007b).

For a number of years, Lauren and her colleagues (e.g., Seifert & Baker, 2009) have been talking about the **Six Week Rule** for practice/rehearsal in dementia care activities. We have found that participants with Alzheimer-type dementia or related memory impairments seem to improve their performance on some memory tasks when those tasks are repeated weekly for 6 weeks or more (e.g., pantomime recognition, Seifert, 1999; Seifert & Baker, 1998; Seifert & Baker, 2009). On some tasks, improvements manifest later—appearing after six months or more (Seifert & Baker, 2009). Other authors have talked about the importance of repetition for remembering (Ebbinghaus, 1885/1964), and of repetition with *active retrieval* when a person is being

The following version of “The Kissing Wall” is different than the one presented in Chapter 2. This one is simpler and written to suit persons with moderate-to-severe neurocognitive impairment/dementia.

**The Kissing Wall
by Virginia L. Smerglia**

The town of River Bend is located at a beautiful point on the Ashland River. In fact, it is so beautiful that visitors to the town often say things like, “What a heavenly spot!” The surrounding hills are covered with forests and meadows. The trees change with the seasons and wildflowers and birds add every color. So, the views are heavenly!

As you might guess from the name, “River Bend,” the town is in a place where the Ashland River curves. In fact, the river curves so much that the town is a peninsula. Part of the town faces east and part faces west. Some of the town’s residents see the sun rise in the east and some see the sun set in the west. So, through the years, people have called these two areas of the town “Sunrise” and “Sunset.” They’re used to saying things like, “I live in Sunrise” or “I’m going to see friends over in Sunset.”

The town’s layout has stayed pretty much the same throughout its two-hundred-year history. This is because besides occupying a very beautiful spot, River Bend has been protected from floods. The Ashland River’s current is not too swift, and the town sits a little above the river.

Part of the town is a park on the river bank in the Sunset area. This beautiful park, called Sunset Park, has been there about as long as the town. Here, the sunsets change according to the season. They tend to be pink and blue in spring and summer, golden and orange in fall, and blue and violet in winter. The sunsets in the park are so very beautiful that unless it is cloudy, there is usually an audience of town residents in cars and on park benches. It rests the mind and gives peace to the soul to sit there and watch the colors of the sky at sunset.

In the park, about two hundred feet back from the water’s edge, is a stone wall which has been there as long as anyone can remember. The wall is made of smooth river stones of many colors: gray, brown, red, even a sort of blue. It is about three and a half feet high.

There are some town legends about the wall. One is that the wall was built by early settlers to discourage large animals like bears from coming into town. The settlers believed animals would hunt further downstream rather than trying to get over or around the wall. It’s interesting that there are no tales about whether the wall was a

success at keeping animals out of town, but it is a tradition to refer to the wall's ability, like saying that something is as likely to happen "as a bear coming over the wall at sunset." When a town's person says such a thing, she or he means that something isn't very likely to happen.

A second tradition is that the wall is where young lovers share their first kiss. Of course, that's where the wall got its name. It is called the "kissing wall." Also, there have been many marriage proposals there. So, the wall is quite a romantic place and many couples have carved their initials into the trees nearby.

Angela and Kevin Thayer are one of the town's well-known couples who got engaged at the kissing wall. Angela is the forty-four-year-old mayor of River Bend. And, people love to say her name: "Mayor Thayer." If there's a problem, like too many mosquitoes in summer or too many chuckholes in winter, someone is sure to remark, "Well, what did Mayor Thayer thay?" And, Mayor Angela Thayer takes the joke in good humor.

Here's the story of Angela and Kevin and the kissing wall. Twenty-one years ago, on a beautiful warm July evening, Kevin Thayer showed up at Angela's house with a box of fast-food fried chicken and a bottle of champagne and asked if she would like to join him for a picnic supper in the park. She was twenty-three at the time and just finishing her first year as a junior accountant at the local hospital. She and Kevin had been high school sweethearts. Their college years separated them. They had been far apart, and they dated other people. After college, they came home to find they were still soul mates.

So on this July night, Angela was a little shocked but very happy when Kevin, nervous and shaking, perched her on top of the kissing wall and brought out the champagne and a diamond ring. Angela was surprised, because Kevin had just finished his training at the police academy. That's right. He was a brand new policeman—on the job for only a few months. Angela thought he might want to get more experience in his new career before making any more big decisions. But, she later found out that Kevin was worried. He was afraid one of the young doctors at the hospital where she worked might ask Angela out and he thought a rookie cop couldn't compete with a doctor!

Now, twenty-one years later, Angela is the mayor of River Bend. She has been mayor for six years. Kevin is a detective in the police department, and they have two daughters, Mattie, age ten, and Della, age seven.

The thing that occupies Angela's mind these days is a very large dilemma for her and for the town council. They have decisions to make which could change their town. The decisions they have to make concern the kissing wall. How can this charming stone wall which is an important part of the town's history be involved in a huge problem?

The problem with the kissing wall is that it is no longer safe to sit on. It is very old—maybe over a hundred years—and a few rocks have fallen off the top. The bottom is unstable, too. One group of citizens wants the wall to be taken down so that there is no chance of someone getting hurt. However, other citizens say the wall is history and should be left as it is. They say the town can put up signs that announce the wall as unsafe to sit or lean on. They don't want the wall that was enjoyed by so many of their ancestors to be destroyed.

Before the town council meeting, the members have read the opinions on both



sides of the issue. On the night of their meeting, Mayor Thayer says, “I know this is hard. We don’t want to lose our kissing wall. We want to be able to go there and watch the sunset just as our parents and grandparents did, and we want the wall to be there for our children and grandchildren. The wall links us with the past and the future. On the other hand, we certainly don’t want anyone to be injured because the wall is unsafe. I have talked with many people in the town and I want to give you an idea that might solve our problem. I think this solution may satisfy everyone. I have talked with a builder who restores historic buildings. He says it is his business to take things apart and put them together exactly as they were, but like new. He and his workers can take the wall down and lay it out like a map. They would mark each rock’s place. Then, they would put the wall back together with new, strong mortar. It will be our good old kissing wall, but the rocks will no longer fall off the top, and the bottom will not be unstable any more. The rocks will have new connections. What do you think?”

All the town council members rise to their feet with applause for their mayor’s work on finding a good solution to their problem. Mayor Angela Thayer has found a way to save the kissing wall and make it safe. Her husband, Kevin, stands in the back of the town hall and applauds as well. He is very proud!

Talking Points for “The Kissing Wall”

- The town of “River Bend” is named for its location on the Ashland River.
- Two areas of the town are “Sunrise” and “Sunset.”
- In the area of “Sunset” there is a beautiful park with a wall that people sit on to watch the sun as it goes down each day. The colors of the setting sun are awe inspiring.
- The wall in the park is called the “kissing wall,” because it is a romantic place.
- Angela and Kevin Thayer were engaged at the kissing wall, and Angela is now the town’s mayor.
- A problem has arisen, because the town’s wall is crumbling. So, the town council has called a meeting in order to discuss the problem.
- Mayor Angela Thayer proposes a solution. The town will bring in a builder, who will carefully take the wall apart and put it back together again with new mortar.
- Everyone is very glad that their mayor has found a way to save this historic landmark.