

# Connection

ISSUE 1, 2025

Establishing a replicable model for a senior life that is focused on brain health, wellness and purposeful living.



## A Decade of Success in Memory Care

### Rooted in Best Practices, Growing in Impact

This year marks a significant milestone for Abe's Garden Community as we celebrate the 10th anniversary of establishing our Memory Support Center of Excellence. Over the past decade, our commitment to establishing a replicable model for senior life focused on brain health, wellness, and purposeful living has been at the forefront of everything we do. What began as a vision to redefine memory care has flourished into a vibrant community where residents and families find support, connection, and dignity. Together, we've built a foundation of excellence and innovation that continues to shape the future of memory care.

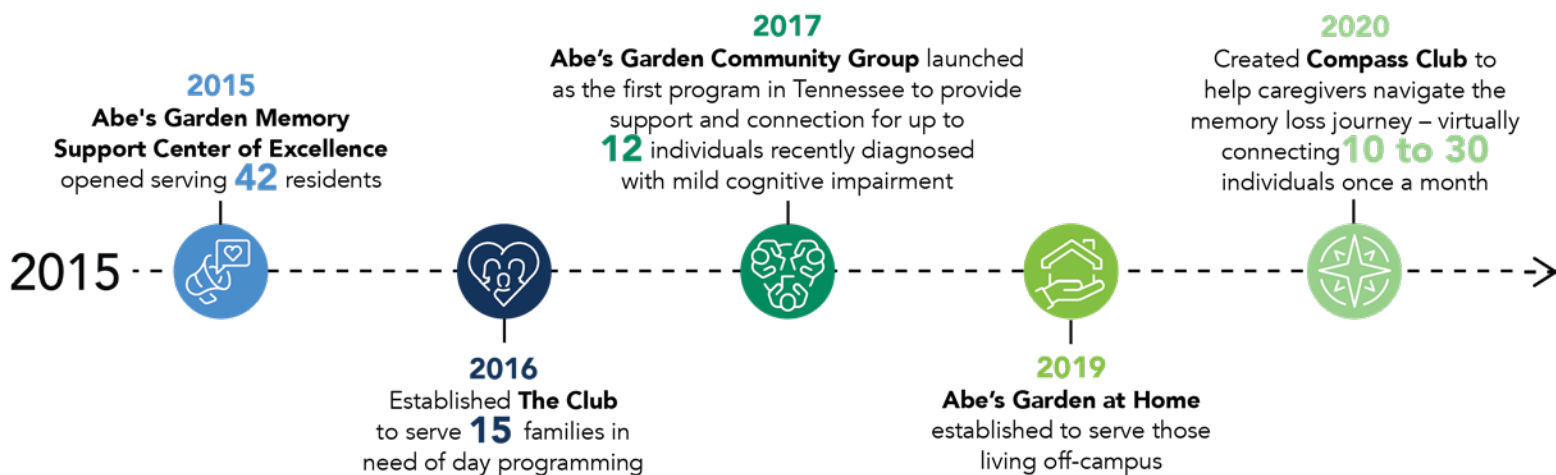
As with many stories of innovation, Abe's Garden Memory Support began out of necessity. After navigating the Alzheimer's care options in Nashville for their father, Abram "Abe" Shmerling, M.D., the Shmerling family set out to create a memory care community to significantly improve the lives of those living with dementia. AND— to open the community

as a model for others to replicate. Abe's daughter, Judy Shmerling Given, recalls those early days working with her brother, Mike: "He was a man on a mission!"

#### Evidence-Based Practices

From the initial vision, through the grand opening in 2015, and now with ten years of operation, we have demonstrated there are more effective ways to care for those with cognitive impairments. At the heart of our internationally renowned programming is our person-directed, purposeful engagement. Our evidence-based *I'm Still Here*® approach has clearly documented benefits. Research indicates reductions in anxiety symptoms by 42%, depression by 41%, and neuropsychiatric symptoms by 32%. These figures highlight the effectiveness of our model and reinforce our role as a leader in transforming dementia care through our Hearthstone Institute by Abe's Garden (HIAG) education and consultancy offerings.

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Our internationally recognized, therapeutic garden and award-winning Memory Support courtyard – under construction in 2015 and now!”

## Community Impact

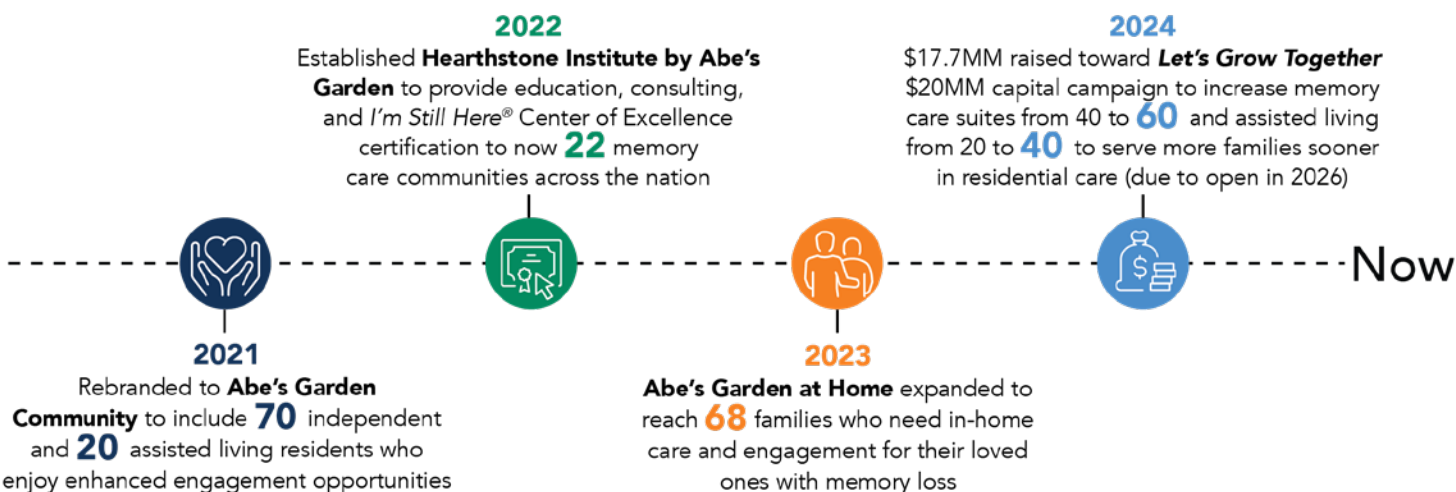
Abe’s Garden Community team members consistently develop new ways of serving more individuals with dementia on and off campus. Understanding that every individual has their own unique needs and preferences, we offer a wide range of evidence-based engagement opportunities. Residents are encouraged to engage in up to six hours of daily classes, clubs, and committees designed to nurture wellness of mind, body, and spirit – and friends and family are always welcome! Abe’s Garden Club offers vibrant day programming for those in mid to late stages of dementia, while our Community Group provides support for those in the earliest stages. Anywhere from 10-30 loved ones participate in our virtual support group and receive one-on-one support when needed. Abe’s Garden at Home brings best-in-class engagement to those who are not able or prefer not to participate in on-campus programming. And HIAG provides education consultancy to 22 other memory care communities. We are growing!

Due to open in the spring of 2026, our *Let’s Grow Together* capital campaign construction will allow us to serve more families on campus, too. The project includes the addition of 20 new assisted living and 20 new memory support suites and provides additional places to provide a wider variety

of engagement opportunities for everyone on campus. Keeping true to our roots, there will also be new designated spaces to share our knowledge and educate both private and professional caregivers.

As we celebrate 10 years of memory care, we thank you, our loyal, compassionate and generous philanthropic partners who have made this dream a reality! You share in our past, current and future accomplishments and inspire us to forge ahead. Your commitment to us keeps us committed to growing our impact through innovation to provide dignified, positive programming locally and around the globe.

Our **Let’s Grow Together** capital campaign expansion in progress!



# Abe's Garden Community Announces \$17.7 MM Raised Toward \$20 MM Capital Campaign

On September 19, 2024, Abe's Garden Community opened its doors to the media and special guests to celebrate the launch of the public phase of its \$20 million *Let's Grow Together* capital campaign. The highlight of the evening was the announcement that we had raised 16.7MM 82% (now 88%) of our goal. The evening was more than just an announcement – it was a heartfelt celebration of progress, hope, and a shared commitment to redefining memory care.

Nashville Mayor Freddie O'Connell delivered a beautiful keynote, stating, "One of my favorite parts about Abe's Garden is that it's called Abe's Garden COMMUNITY!" He shared his insights on how senior brain health and memory support have shaped our city's identity and the ways we are prioritizing these critical issues. In a recent Community Needs Evaluation Report, there was a focus on the needs of seniors and aging Nashvillians. O'Connell went on to say "People at AGC in particular know that aging brings with it challenges, not only of physical health conditions, but things that affect so many people's quality of life. The idea of Community and Independent Living here [at AGC] happens in a community with mental health support. As a city, [AGC helps] ensure that people choosing to live in Nashville will be able to thrive the entire time they are here."

Joining him were former Mayor Bill Purcell, Robert (Bobby) Frist, Jr., Dr. Sandra Simmons, Founder and Board Chair Mike Shmerling, and CEO Susannah Dwyer, who shared reflections on the community's journey and the campaign's transformative potential. With warmth and pride, each speaker reflected on the incredible journey of Abe's Garden Community and the impact this campaign will have on



Mayor Freddie O'Connell speaking at the capital campaign announcement event.

residents, families, and the global memory care community.

Mike Shmerling added, "Our *Let's Grow Together* expansion is a labor of love, driven by a vision to elevate senior living and memory care. We couldn't be more grateful for everyone who's joined us on this journey."

Guests were treated to a closer look at plans for the 38,000-square-foot expansion designed by architect partner ESa and constructed under the

direction of R.C. Mathews. The community will increase its residential capacity from 130 apartments and suites to 170. A music therapy lab, chapel, and multi-use community room with an outdoor terrace will provide new spaces to elevate engagement opportunities for residents, families, and friends.

The evening ended with the Abe's Garden Community Hope Choir singing "All You Need Is Love." Their touching performance moved many to tears, perfectly capturing the joy and connection at the heart of Abe's Garden Community.

This milestone event was made possible through the collaboration between Abe's Garden Community and FINN Partners. Their strategic communications plan shared the mission and expansion plans with local media and national audiences, inspiring us to complete the campaign by September 2025 – celebrating 10 years of memory support!

Learn more or contribute at [abesgarden.org/capital-campaign](https://abesgarden.org/capital-campaign), or contact our development team at 615.345.9575.

# Expanding Impact in Music Therapy & Research

A state-of-the-art music therapy and research lab is at the heart of our *Let's Grow Together* expansion project. This Music Lab will be the first of its kind built on a senior living campus – right here at Abe's Garden Community!

From the outset, music has been an integral engagement opportunity throughout our campus. While many senior living and memory care communities provide music-based programs, few employ a board-certified music therapist. AGC's music therapist works closely with our Continuous Quality Improvement Coordinator to implement and monitor the impact of music therapy interventions. And, through HIAG, we have the mechanism to share best practices with other senior living and memory support communities.

Music has been scientifically validated to improve cognition and immune function. Studies show that music relieves depression and reduces stress, agitation, and behavioral issues in individuals living with dementia and other neurological diagnoses. Indeed, emerging research indicates that music can:

- reduce the need for pharmacological interventions
- unlock forgotten memories, and restore and rebuild neural pathways
- trigger the production of the same chemicals used in anti-depressants and sedatives like endorphins, serotonin, prolactin, oxytocin, and dopamine
- improve the quality of life for people with a variety of cognitive challenges

To fine-tune this emerging research and produce evidence-based outcomes, a precise audio-controlled environment is needed. Currently, research studies often take place in fractionated environments in which different laboratories and investigators use varying facilities and methods. Abe's Garden Community's Music Therapy & Research Lab will offer a solution.

A world-class audio laboratory facility, our Music Lab is uniquely designed with advanced technology necessary to study how musical activities affect health outcomes within a dedicated controlled research setting. The lab can accommodate researchers from around the globe with



access to real-time observation (in-person or through video technology) and the ability to research specific variables (types of music, volume, mixes, posture, movement, visuals, time limits, etc.) as they pursue their respective hypotheses. AGC team members will work with researchers to ensure variables are understood and implemented.

Yes, our *Let's Grow Together* campaign funds a capital expansion to serve more families on campus. At the same time, we are staying true to our *I'm Still Here*® model for all residents and program participants. This intimate music lab will be used for Abe's Garden Community residents, program participants, families, and friends to share immersive music experiences. Imagine the joy of experiencing the arts through live-streaming opera performances, Broadway shows, symphony concerts, art exhibits, movies, and more! The Music Lab is another way we can enhance the quality of life for everyone in the Abe's Garden Community family.

Abe's Garden Community is proud to have been featured in the December 1st, 2024 issue of the Tennessean. The following pages contain excerpts from this feature written by Beth Warren.



Gracie Ault plays the guitar as she encourages Wilson Benton to shake the maraca as she sings to him in his room at Abe's Garden Community  
STEPHANIE AMADOR / THE TENNESSEAN

### As featured in the Tennessean

Gracie Ault, a new music therapist at Abe's, has seen the impact music therapy can have with residents.

"Listening to music engages several parts of the brain," said Ault, a recent graduate of Belmont University. "Sometimes it kind of gets them awake and in a good mood."

During a recent one-on-one session with a memory care resident at Abe's, Ault invited a resident with dementia who had been sitting in silence at a table to join her near the greenhouse to make music together. She played several songs from the Memphis native's era, including "Rhinstone Cowboy."

The man's blue eyes lit up as he recognized the tune. Ault kept the beat with a red tambourine while the man shook a wooded maraca near his ear.

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**People think music therapy is just like bringing your guitar and singing for someone and they feel better and then you go home," Ault said. "It's much more. There's planning, there's assessing, documenting. Measurable progress is an important part of it.**

"Very good," Ault said, encouraging him as he shook a wooden maraca near his ear.

When she asked the man his opinion of the song, he replied: "What do I think about it? It's great."

When Ault played the 1951 hit "Hey, Good Lookin,'" in which singer Hank Williams asks "What you got cookin'?" How's about cookin' something up with me?" a cook who happened to be strolling down the hall swung her hips to the beat and smiled while carrying a silver tray of brownies.

The memory care resident tends to wander the halls, so Ault's goal is to keep him engaged. She notices if he smiles, hums, taps his foot or plays an instrument, participation she charts and measures over time.



Ault said her grandfather, John, loved to hear her play guitar or oboe. He developed dementia and eventually died, influencing her decision to switch her major at Belmont University from classical oboe performance to music therapy, learning how to use her musical gifts to help other people's grandpas and grandmas in memory care.

She's now one of more than 10,000 board certified music therapists credentialed through the Certification Board for Music Therapists, the only board of its kind in the U.S.

"I just like listening and I like learning from them, learning about their life experiences," Ault said of working with seniors. "They all have a background and they all have a story."

Belmont created its Music Therapy program 11 years ago to teach evidence-based and ethical practices, including working with clients and their families to develop individual goals and objectives and collect data to gauge efficacy, said Alejandra Ferrer, an associate professor and coordinator of Belmont's program.

Sometimes individuals may be overstimulated or even agitated by a certain genre of music, considering it noise, so music therapy isn't for everyone, she said. Still, she expects the field to grow as research shows it often can improve outcomes in a variety of health care settings, from soothing children during painful procedures to calming psychiatric patients.

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When his father needed memory care, Mike Shmerling didn't know where to turn. He'd never stepped foot in a nursing home.

He and his family saw their father suffer from boredom while living in four or five different senior communities in the Nashville area over an 11-year period. They'd find him asleep in front of the television or participating in a mundane activity like stringing macaroni.

When Mike decided to open a Nashville center, he kept his father in mind, displaying Abe's white doctor's coat in the lobby with a plaque in the late doctor's honor.

He knew so many families were grappling with how to care for their loved ones suffering from dementia. It's listed as the underlying cause of death for more than 279,000 women



*Barbara Curley and Life Engagement Manager Valerie Snider dance together to music at Abe's Garden Community.*

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and men in 2021, the most recent statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

This includes nearly 119,400 deaths blamed on Alzheimer's disease nationally. In Tennessee, the death toll reached 2,879.

Alzheimer's was the No. 7 leading cause of death in the U.S. in 2021, claiming nearly 119,400 lives, according to the national 2024 report by the Alzheimer's Association.

Abe's death inspired his family to create a center he would have enjoyed.

Abe's Garden Community uses an engagement-focused approach to dementia care that provides a sense of purpose and encourages learning. It also keeps in mind individual preferences.

Abe's leaders work to create pioneering best practices that range from design of the building to healthy farm-to-table meals, to resident programs to the training of its staff.

Residents are free to move about and can help tend to the outdoor vegetable and flower gardens, linger on a bench, visit with other residents or take a nap inside in an oversized chair. Visitors are encouraged to drop in and can share meals, cookout on the outdoor grills and join in the activities or find a quiet corner to sit and chat, said Judy Shmerling Given, Abe's daughter and the center's senior director of campus development.

"We have evidence to support that we've been able to decrease the symptoms of depression and anxiety and agitation and because of that, we've been able to decrease medications," she said. "And, now we have longer, better retention of staff because they're not constantly putting out those fires."



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***We have evidence to support that we've been able to decrease the symptoms of depression and anxiety and agitation and because of that, we've been able to decrease medications," she (Judy Shmerling Given) said. "And, now we have longer, better retention of staff because they're not constantly putting out those fires.***

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Given joined two other center officials to give a presentation at the global conference of Alzheimer's Disease International in Krakow, Poland earlier this year. Leaders in the senior care industry have sought guidance from the Nashville center from across Tennessee and the nation as well as from other countries, including Australia, she said.

Because the Nashville center has a waiting list for families looking for a home for a loved one, Given encourages early interaction, long before a bed is needed.

Women and men with early stages of dementia can participate in certain daytime club activities, including lunch.

"When we've been working with a family, we can help them recognize when they're at those transitional points to increase in-home care, or to look at a day program or when it's time to look at residential," Given said.

They know our staff and the routines and it makes a very smooth transition."



115 Woodmont Boulevard  
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**Let's Grow Together**

Use this QR code for more information about our capital campaign.



629.249.1141

[www.abesgarden.org](http://www.abesgarden.org)

Abe's Garden® Community is a  
501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

# Open Now for Exciting News!

**READ ABOUT OUR CELEBRATION EVENT AND HOW WE'VE RAISED AN IMPRESSIVE 88% OF THE \$20MM GOAL FROM 185 GENEROUS LET'S GROW TOGETHER PHILANTHROPIC PARTNERS!**



(L to R) State Representative Bob Freeman, Mayor Freddie O'Connell, Former Mayor Bill Purcell, State Representative Bo Mitchell, and Abe's Garden Community Board Member Mina Johnson; Beth Seigenthaler Courtney, Lisa Shmerling, and Mike Shmerling at Abe's Garden Community; Abe's Garden Community resident Hope Choir singing "All You Need Is Love."