

What Would Walt Whitman Say?

The poet remains a touchstone 125 years later, says scholar Ed Folsom '76 (PhD).

Interview by Kathleen McGarvey

It's been a big year for Walt Whitman: his novella, *Life and Adventures of Jack Engle*, lost for 165 years, has been rediscovered; his most famous poem, "Song of Myself," has recently been reissued in an important new edition coedited by **Ed Folsom '76 (PhD)**; and this spring marked a century and a quarter since his death.

Folsom, the Roy J. Carver Professor of English at the University of Iowa, is one of the most prominent scholars of Whitman. He is coeditor of the digital *Walt Whitman Archive*, which makes the poet's vast body of work freely available. With poet, essayist, and journalist Christopher Merrill, he's just edited *Song of Myself: With a Complete Commentary* (University of Iowa Press, 2016), a volume that leads readers through the 52 sections of the poem with a written conversation between Folsom and Merrill about their insights into each section.

The work allows any reader to "begin

joining in the give-and-take with Whitman that is the whole purpose of his work," Folsom says. "Whitman demands that the reader actively talk back to the poetry and not accept it passively, and Chris's and my commentaries set out to initiate that dialogue."

Whitman's most enduring legacy, Folsom says, is his "incalculable" impact on American, and global, literature. He always addressed his poems to future readers, and poets "have talked back to him continually—arguing with him, praising him, questioning him about the diverse and democratic American future he promised."

How did Whitman become a poet?

Whitman was an autodidact; he was done with his formal schooling by the time he was 12, and he learned by reading books he took out of lending libraries and by visiting museums and by walking the streets of New York and Brooklyn. He learned typesetting as a teenager and published his first newspaper articles in his mid-teens.

As he grew into the newspaper business, he developed a style of directly addressing his readers, something he would carry over with him to his radical new kind of poetry. That poetry drew from his journalism and from hearing orators speaking around the city. Whitman dreamed of becoming an orator himself and made notes for many speeches about America and democracy. He reshaped his journalistic voice and oratorical voice into a new kind of poetry that has traits of both journalism—an attentiveness to detail, an obsession with close observation of the world around him—and oratory—long lines that often have the cadence of a speech. It's as if we're hearing a spoken voice on the page, directly addressing the "you"—that slippery English pronoun that can mean a single intimate reader or a world of strangers.

Where do you suggest someone begin when reading Whitman?

His poetry is about a celebration of the

A Life of Letters

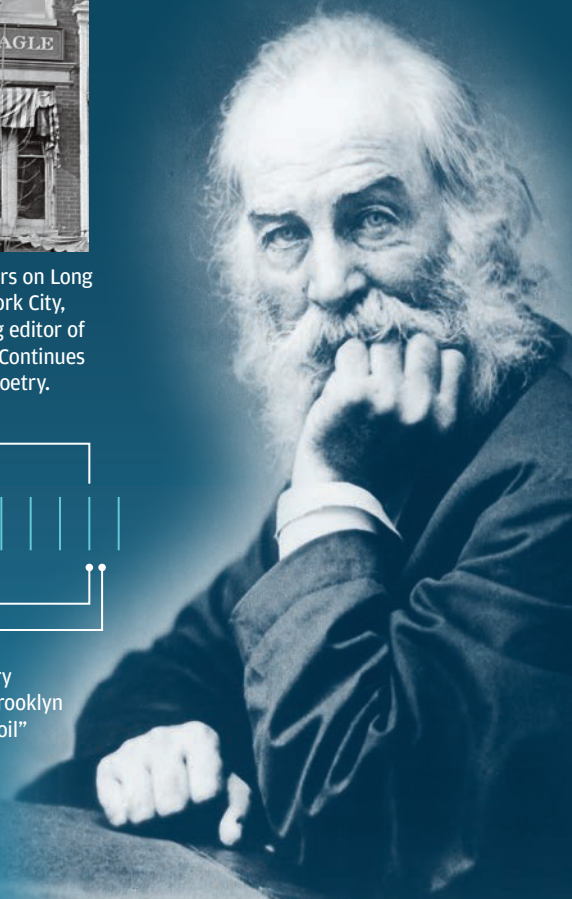
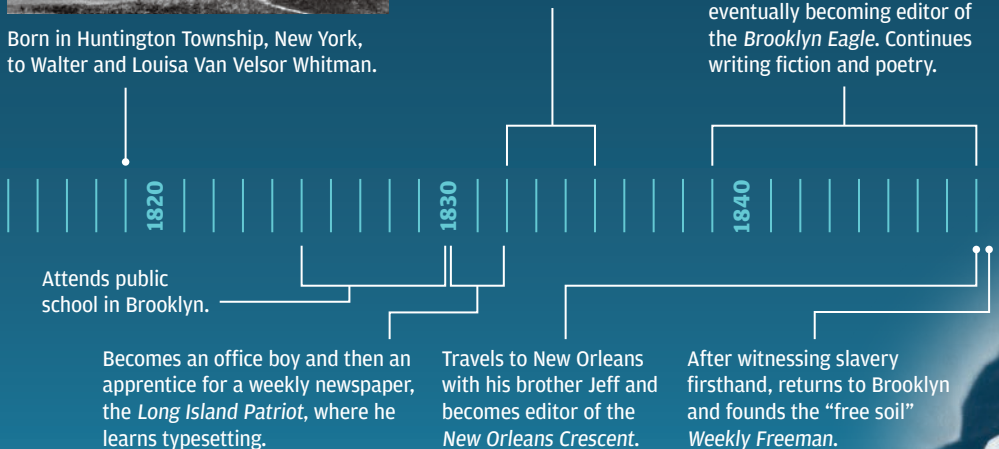
Walt Whitman's life encompassed nearly all of the 19th century, a tumultuous period of national expansion and civil war.



Born in Huntington Township, New York, to Walter and Louisa Van Velsor Whitman.



Works for newspapers on Long Island and in New York City, eventually becoming editor of the *Brooklyn Eagle*. Continues writing fiction and poetry.



single, separate individual and, at the same time, the celebration of the “en-masse,” the wild diversity of a nation that manages to stay unified while “containing multitudes.” Nowhere is this fluctuation between self and cosmos, individual and nation, better seen than in his longest and best poem, “Song of Myself,” a work that every American owes it to herself or himself to read.

What’s the significance of his newly rediscovered fiction?

The discovery of *Jack Engle* is extremely important because, for the first time, we have fiction written and published by Whitman after he had started writing the poems that would be included in his first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Before this discovery, the latest known fiction by Whitman was published in 1848, and that always made it easy to assume that Whitman gave up fiction and took up poetry, since we had a convenient seven-year break between the last known fiction and the radical new poetry. *Jack Engle* was published in 1852, *Leaves of Grass* in 1855. Whitman had begun publishing his new free-form radical poetry in newspapers in 1850, so we now know that the poetry and fiction were mingling in ways we had never before known.

This makes us rethink everything we thought we knew about Whitman’s early

writing career. Scholars and critics will be working on the implications of this for many years to come. We can now see that Whitman in the early 1850s was still unsure about what form his life’s work would take.


The nature of democracy is under discussion around the world right now—and it’s a subject with which Whitman himself was deeply concerned. What can people learn from reading his work?

When Whitman first began making notes toward the poem that would become “Song of Myself,” he jotted down “I am the poet of slaves and the masters of slaves.”

He was trying to assume a voice, in other words, that was capacious enough to speak for the entire range of people in the nation—from the most powerless to the most powerful, from those with no possessions to those who possessed others. If he could imagine such a unifying voice, he believed, he could help Americans begin to speak the language of democracy, because if slaves could begin to see that they contained within themselves the potential to be slavemasters, just as slavemasters contained within themselves the potential to be slaves, then slavery would cease to exist, because people of the nation would begin to understand that everyone is potentially everyone else, that the key to American

identity is a vast empathy with all the “others” in the culture.

In “Song of Myself,” Whitman says “I am large, / I contain multitudes,” and this voice that is vast enough and indiscriminate enough to find within itself all the possibilities of American identity would become the great democratic voice, a voice for the citizens of the country to aspire to. Today, the nation is so divided in political and social and economic and racial ways that it has become impossible to imagine a single unifying voice that speaks for America. Every voice that claims to speak for the “American people” today is in fact a divisive voice, alienating as many Americans as it unifies. So Whitman seems more important now than ever.

It’s hard work to make the imaginative leap to a fully democratic voice, one that celebrates diversity and finds strength and unity in the wild variety that defines this nation. Whitman knew it would be difficult, perhaps impossible. During his lifetime, Whitman experienced a massive civil war, an entire generation of American men destroyed, when the union could not contain its multitudes and came apart at the seams. I think he would sense a similar danger today. 

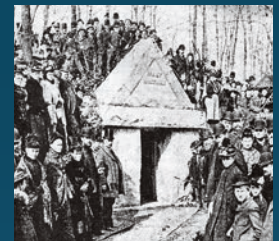
Visit the Walt Whitman Archive at Whitmanarchive.org.

Serializes the novel *Life and Adventures of Jack Engle* in six installments of New York’s *Sunday Dispatch*.



The Civil War begins and his brother George enlists.

Buys a house in Camden, New Jersey, with royalties from *Leaves of Grass*.



Dies and is buried in Camden, New Jersey, in a tomb he designed and commissioned.

Publishes the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. The 12 untitled poems include “Song of Myself,” “I Sing the Body Electric,” and “The Sleepers.”

Visits his brother, wounded at Fredericksburg, at the Union camp in Virginia.

Works as a clerk for the Bureau of Indian Affairs but is fired by Interior Secretary James Harlan, possibly because he found *Leaves of Grass* offensive. *Drum-Taps* published.

Publishes *Good-Bye, My Fancy*, his final volume of poetry.

1850

1860

1870

1880

1890

Continues working as a writer and editor, publishes second and third editions of *Leaves of Grass*. Unemployed during the winter of 1859–1860.

Moves to Washington, D.C., to help care for wounded soldiers.

Publishes *Democratic Vistas* and the fifth edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

Suffers a paralytic stroke. Leaves Washington and moves in with his brother George in Camden, New Jersey.

Travels and gives lectures in the United States and Canada. His health continues to decline.

Trash and Treasure

In a new memoir, Sascha Feinstein '85 recounts growing up with his father—a gifted artist and a “hoarder of monumental proportions.”

By Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

A month or so after Sascha Feinstein '85 released *Wreckage: My Father's Legacy of Art & Junk* (Bucknell University Press), he received a welcome surprise: a four-page, single-spaced letter from his first creative writing teacher, the novelist Thomas Gavin, a professor emeritus at Rochester. It was “one of the greatest letters of my life,” Feinstein says.

Feinstein is now an accomplished writer himself—a poet, an essayist, and the codirector of the creative writing program at Lycoming College in Pennsylvania. *Wreckage* tells the story of growing up as the son of Sam Feinstein, a noted painter in the American postwar abstract expressionist movement who was also, according to his son, “a hoarder of monumental proportions.”

“The students he taught revered him,” says Feinstein. “Those who painted from his massive still lifes obviously knew he collected plenty of junk, but such facades eclipsed the many layers of things buried within.”

Feinstein's mother, also an artist, died of cancer when he was in high school, leaving him alone with his father, whose hoarding consumed entire rooms of the home they shared. His father's creativity bred physical and emotional destruction, a kind of contradiction that captivates Feinstein.

“As a writer, I'm most interested when opposites fuse with one another,” he says, adding that the overarching theme of *Wreckage* is “creativity married to destruction.” Yet, Feinstein finds that his father's ideas about the creative process hold true, for artists, as well as for him as a writer.

“The artistic concepts that he taught for half a century—largely about making a canvas its own self-expression, with the fluidity of form and balanced colors creating a lifelike presence—still seem unassailable to me,” he says. “Each painting should inspire a journey for the eye that cannot be experienced in any other way except by viewing that painting. And, ideally, the viewer should hunger to return. Making an artistic statement that fully stands alone, regardless of medium, should be, I think, the goal of any artist. It's certainly my greatest aspiration as a writer.”

Has he succeeded in this aspiration? Gavin found that Feinstein's



JUNK YARD: Father and son pose atop “The Monster,” a backyard sculpture the elder built from a coal stove and other throwaways.

account of his father's scavenging recalled Robinson Crusoe's heroic efforts to rescue remains from his wrecked ship. But, as Gavin wrote in his letter to Feinstein, “Your superb portrait of [your father] in all his maddening, outrageous glory succeeds in many other ways that Defoe never imagined.” **R**

BOOK EXCERPT

Fire and Mettle

Out of physical and emotional wreckage, a radiant still life emerges.

By Sascha Feinstein '85

In the studio, the scrap metal included hernia-inducing, eight-foot iron bars and other anchor-heavy fragments. He had stored a refrigerator and roughly a ton of cast iron, including all the parts to a cast-iron stove. Two snow plows. The remains of my childhood swing set. Stove piping. Unidentifiable chunks of iron and brass slag. A tiny bit of copper, barely worth the gas money to sell it.

All the metal went to a local sculptor who built castles and landscapes for fairies and sprites. Even with me and his friend helping

out, it took him a number of truckloads to move all the metal. . . .

The refrigerator made me laugh. I knew it from childhood, and I remembered my father talking about its arrival: How Dicky Buck, one of the town's well-known characters, carried it into the house on his back. (Buck did not work for an appliance company; who knows where he got it.) The box conked out during my teenage years, and if I helped my father move it to the studio, I've forgotten that memory. But there it was, on its side, the door off and resting elsewhere. The fridge itself was packed full, of course, primarily with two large containers—boxes or crates (I couldn't tell in the

shadow). I got on my knees, gripped the edge of one, and pulled back, *hard*. Nothing. Then I pulled using my body weight as well and slowly inched it out.

“Jesus,” I said, out loud but to myself, “this is like a box of rocks!”

Turned out, it *was* a box of rocks. So was the other. The purpose? Perhaps my father envisioned a stone path. Maybe a tabletop. Whatever the concept, it was postponed—though not necessarily abandoned; in his mind, no project was ever considered hopeless. I laboriously dragged the crates outside and poured their contents near the studio, creating a mound that looked like a small memorial in a poverty-stricken country.

From the studio wreckage, I kept about five things: two star-shaped iron cogs; an antique fire extinguisher that I recall being part of his still life; an antique clothes mangle made in Erie, Pa.; and a hefty blown-glass jug with a rusted spring-pressed top (originally used, I’m told, for insecticide). Tomb of K’inich Janaab Pakal this was not. Still, the artifacts were cool.

And although I initially placed it on the scrap metal heap, I ended up keeping a circular piece of iron, shaped like the top of a boiler with a two-inch lip. I have no use for it—but it’s the centerpiece to the greatest still life my father ever created in that studio. The vertical painting’s 47 by 67 inches—about four by five-and-a-half feet—with the painted objects scaled down by roughly a third. As he did in New York with the realistic rendering of the burned-out house, he’d unearth this realistic work for visitors who felt uneasy about abstraction, as though proving the merits of his craft. (“Now *that* I like,” many would say.) But because the painting never hung inside the house, the image remained primarily in my memory: a still life centered on that radiant, circular piece of iron, glowing from its center to the edges of the canvas with sun-like fury.

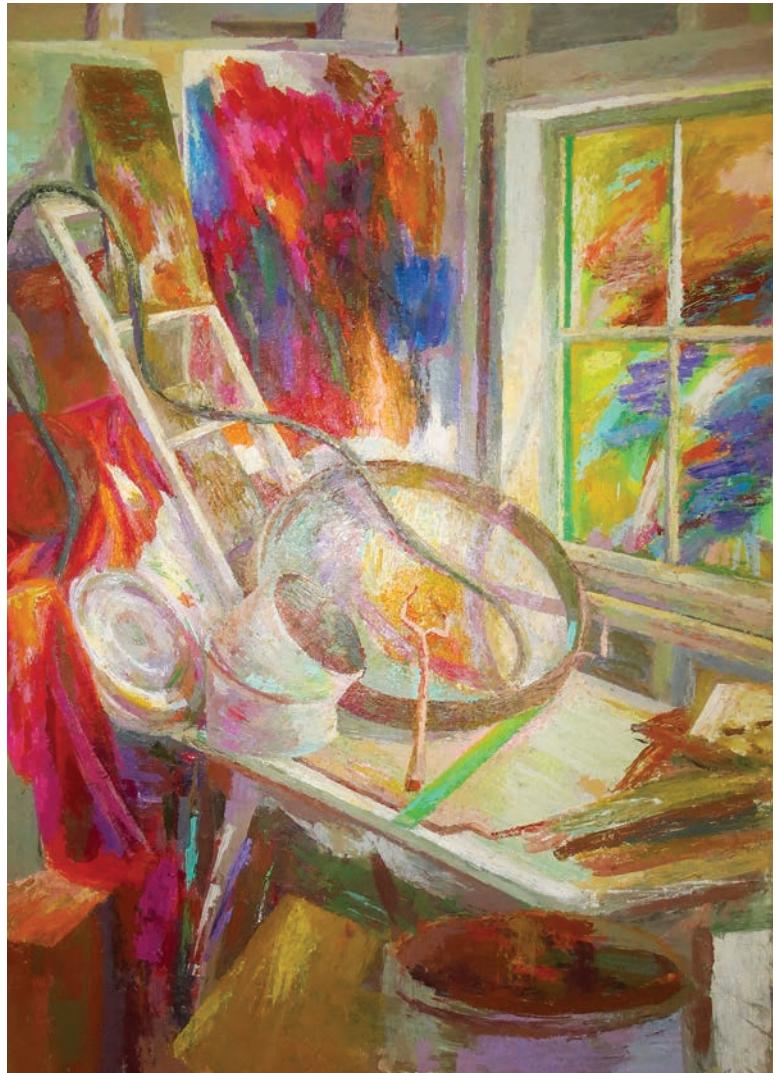
So it’s startling now, with the canvas prominently displayed and well lit, to accept that easily 40 percent of the still life—most of the bottom half and all of the top four inches—accurately depicts the studio’s gray wood. Gray. What creates the feeling of uniformly explosive radiance? Four dramatic conclaves of warmth that, in color and gesture, stretch the canvas’s shoulders and arms.

The eye almost immediately turns to the window on the upper right edge; its pane, Vermeer-like, orchestrates both the lighting and the viewer’s attention. Beside it, my father roughed-in a painting start that had been pinned to the back wall, an abstraction undeniably warm in its expression (red, orange, summer). On the left edge, he’s reproduced a drapery that bleeds with the intensity of a beheaded bull.

The centerpiece is that circular piece of iron. Flaking and therefore receptive to the magic of light, it recasts shadow and reflection. But at its center, my father bejeweled the object with a fiery treasure of glowing metal, as though the iron were being forged anew, and this burst of encrusted orange pulls the warmth from the reproduced cloth, and the pinned-up painting start, and the window emanating July, so that the energy surging left and right in this decidedly vertical canvas coalesces in the center like the riveting eye of Kali.

And one can speak of so much more! A wooden, ladder-like

object angles to counter the traditional geometry of the window; a serpentine hose dances from the center, off the edge, and back in; a two-pronged firebrand pierces the iron’s flaming center; cleverly positioned streaks of green drive against flame-like orange to generate new drama. It’s a painting that celebrates the extraordinary driving forces in the mundane, and it’s so fully charged that the grayish areas—which he gave texture and substance, geometry and depth—balance and govern like an ideal rhythm section for a host of sizzling soloists.



FRAMED: Feinstein calls the window—“four glass panes of vibrant . . . imagery”—in this still life by his father a “guide for appreciating abstract expressionism.”

But I want to talk to you about the window in this painting, because, for me, it acts as a tutelary guide for appreciating abstract expressionism. As I noted, those who felt uneasy confronting abstraction received comfort from this painting’s recognizable shapes: the table and stovepipe, the window and frame, the forked prong. This painting elicits *Ah*’s even from the most reticent audiences. So why has no one ever questioned the spirit of July *beyond* the window—four glass panes of vibrant, fully abstract imagery? Why is it accepted once the window itself has been fully established but not without the context of those frames? **R**

Excerpt from Wreckage: My Father’s Legacy of Art & Junk (Bucknell University Press, 2017). Reprinted with permission.

Unlikely Friends Offer Lessons on Leadership

Two men discover a like-minded approach to teamwork and success.

By Jim Ver Steeg

At first glance, **Charles Norris '68** and Byron Scott don't seem to have much in common. Norris is the consummate businessman who turned McKesson Water into a billion-dollar enterprise and brought Freshpet from a start-up to a publicly traded company worth more than \$350 million. Scott is one of the original "Showtime" Lakers who won three NBA championships playing alongside team leaders Earvin (Magic) Johnson and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. But the two men, who started out as workout buddies, soon found they had a lot in common.

Norris and Scott came to realize that they share remarkably similar views on success and leadership. With the help of writer Jon Warech, the two are suiting up and sharing stories in their new book, *Slam-Dunk Success: Leading from Every Position on the Court* (Center Street). Written in a style that reads very much like a conversation between good friends, the book reflects two important elements of leadership: listening and the importance of developing human connections.

According to Norris, his connection with Scott began about nine years ago. "We met at a popular Los Angeles gym," he says. "There were always a lot of celebrities strutting around—but with Byron I noticed something different. He didn't wear any of the bling I saw on other famous people there, and I was amazed that he seemed to know everyone's name. He took time to talk to everyone, from the people picking up towels to the folks behind the counter making smoothies. It was really incredible."

Norris also recognized in his new friend an attention to others that the longtime businessman considers a cornerstone of his own career success. Over time, the two developed a purposeful connection, learning from each other and building a friendship that is based as much on mutual respect as it is good-natured ribbing. "He's my buddy," Scott says. "He's ridiculously competitive, but he's helped me tremendously and shown me how to grow as a leader. Whatever Charlie brings to the table, I always keep an open mind."

Perhaps at no time were Norris's insistence and Scott's open mind put more to the test than when Norris, a Boston native and a lifelong Celtics fan, convinced former




GYM BUDDIES: Byron Scott (left) and Charles Norris '68 first met at the gym, and now the former basketball star and the businessman are teaming up for a new book on leadership.

Takeaways

- Being the boss is a tricky business, but the secret to success lies in how you treat people.
- Success can lead to complacency. Challenging yourself to be greater will take you to a new level.
- Core values exist within a true leader, but the battle between confidence and overconfidence often lies in the respect you have for others.
- True success comes when you make the most of what you've got rather than trying to be something you're not.
- Everyone on the team plays a role in the organization's success. Putting the team first is the only way to be a champion.

Laker and notorious Celtics rival Scott to travel with him to his hometown. "Charlie changed my perspective on Boston," Scott says. "I wasn't a big fan while I was playing, but now that I've spent time there, I think it's a wonderful city with a lot of important history."

Norris says his friend's new appreciation for Boston is an example of another key

message. "If you take time to get to know someone and bother to ask questions that go beyond the superficial, it's amazing the things you can learn. Everyone has a story, and everyone should consider themselves leaders," he notes. "You don't need to be a professional athlete in order to experience real teamwork and the adrenaline rush that comes with beating the competition." 

Who Cares for the Caregivers?

A life-changing experience set Mary MacDonald '94 on a mission.

By Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

Mary MacDonald '94 recalls what the psychiatrist at Harvard's McClean Hospital said to her while treating her mother, who had been diagnosed with frontotemporal degeneration.

"Mary, I'm so sorry this is happening to you. There are two psychiatric illnesses that are the hardest on the family members. This is one of them."

For the 18 months between her mother's diagnosis and death on Christmas Eve 2008, MacDonald's life would become unrecognizable to her. "One week I was working at Fidelity Investments, making a six-figure salary designing their corporate websites," she says. "The next week I was back home in Syracuse, tying my mother's shoes."

"Mary, I'm losing it," MacDonald recalls her mother telling her in the months before the diagnosis. As the illness set in, what was once easy to dismiss as ordinary forgetfulness and changes in mood gave way to disorientation, anti-social behaviors, and delusions.

MacDonald was her parents' only child, and her father wasn't well either. Her responsibilities required a geographic separation from her then fiancé—and now husband—Karl Ackerman. But when her mother experienced a bad fall, MacDonald returned to Boston, taking her mother along. While the Boston area boasts extraordinary medical services, she found that, in many ways, neither she, nor her mother, was well served.

"She basically experienced her end of life through several different health care facilities," MacDonald says. She rattles them off. Acute care. Assisted living. Specialty acute care. And finally, the skilled nursing facility where her mother died.

Meanwhile, MacDonald suffered acute stress and fatigue "that nearly killed me at age 36," she says. And for seven months after her mother's death, the Phi Beta Kappa graduate remained on the sofa watching HGTV. "I left only to go to grief counseling," she says.

Since willing herself off that couch—with

the help of family, friends, and Karl, who, she says "stuck with me through the terribleness"—MacDonald has been on what she calls a survivor's mission. In 2010, she founded MaryMac Missions to "teach self-care to family and professional caregivers affected by Alzheimer's/dementia." The stresses she faced both during and after caring for her mother were devastating, but common. And there's a wealth of research offering evidence-based interventions that could help caregivers, if only they knew about it, MacDonald says.

Since she attended her first conference 10 years ago, she's made herself into a respected expert in dementia caregiving. She speaks at conferences and before local organizations; offers research-based train-

Massachusetts, home—and a series of gardens along a wheelchair-accessible path they built in 2010 for Mary's father—for what's called a memory café.

There are hundreds of memory cafés in North America. But Mary and Karl's Memory Café in the Garden has been attracting notice as possibly the only one in an outdoor setting—that's according to the Santa Fe dementia care expert Jytte Lokvig, who featured it in a recent book, *The Alzheimer's and Memory Café: How to Start and Succeed with Your Own Café* (Endless Circle Press).

At Memory Café in the Garden, people with dementia and their caregivers explore the gardens together, and participate in activities related to music, movement, and art. The gardens have kept visitors such as



IN BLOOM: MacDonald (second from left) and her husband, Karl, welcome John Hanlon, who has frontotemporal dementia, and his wife, Collette, to their Topsfield, Massachusetts, memory café.

ing to professional and family caregivers; leads retreats; facilitates caregiver support groups and offers individual support; and connects people to resources through her website, Marymacmissions.com. The one-time psychology and German double major has also completed a master's degree in pastoral counseling and become a certified yoga instructor, life coach, and group leader. Her work has been supported by organizations such as the Massachusetts Department of Developmental Services and private donors.

For the past three years, she's been working on a new, related project. She and Karl have opened up their Topsfield,

Darcy Morales-Zullo and her father, Pedro, coming. "My Dad and I are completely at peace and engulfed by the beauty of these gardens," she says.

As the café attracts more notice—it's been featured in several Boston-area news outlets, including, most recently, *Merrimack Valley Magazine*—Mary and Karl have made events they once offered monthly available almost every weekend. Neither a business nor a nonprofit, the memory café is, as the couple writes on the café's website, Rest-stop-ranch.com, "just Karl and Mary" for now. And work on the gardens—"a long-term, life-long project"—will continue. 