

The Art and Science of *BEAN BAGS*

The seeming simplicity of our *BEAN BAG* activity masks the tremendous amount of accumulated knowledge that brought it to the form in which it exists today. It began when two minds with years of experience creating interesting and meaningful activities met in a **B**linding **G**limpse of the **O**bvious.



Mary was talking with *Rachel's mother-in-law, Myra Kail*, about her desire to create a new activity for people with dementia that had a component of physical exercise in it.

Mary has spent her life creating self-directed learning environments, and she had already designed and used several activities that focused on creativity (i.e., pottery) and some that used a combination of board game science with creation of artful pieces. ***But, there was an obvious need for something that could get the blood pumping.***

Myra is a multi-decade veteran of volunteerism who has worked with both old and young in a variety of environments that maintain the key elements of *inclusion* and *community*.

Her trademark is “making something out of nothing (or very little).” ***If things “lying around the house” can be recombined and given a new life, it beats buying some fancy electronic gadget.***

On a visit to Kansas City from her home in Northern Iowa, the two were talking. Once Mary explained what she was searching for, with the speed of a Google search through the universe of interesting activities, Myra said, “Oh Honey, try bean bags.” This precipitated a flood of reasons why bean bags were so “***right.***” At the same time, they did some trouble shooting...brainstorming ideas about size, weight, color combinations, etc.

It didn't take a lot of thought to realize that the BEAN BAG activity could be similar in physical value to the Hacky Sack...the tiny ball (bean bag if you will) that was created for knee rehabilitation therapy. It just made sense that catching and tossing something light would have positive impact on joints and muscles. It gets the blood flowing, more oxygen travels to the brain.

Myra headed home. Mary's brain went into overdrive. She decided to talk the whole thing over with the lady who has done everything from simple clothing alterations to repairing and creating quilts for our family for years.

For Dorothy Dome, sewing is much more than something one does to have quality clothing to wear. It's been the passion of her life for “70 something” years. Fabrics become personal friends of hers.

When Mary explained the idea of creating *BEAN BAGS* to Dorothy a very familiar light came to her eyes. She not only “***GOT IT***”, she seemed to see *BEAN BAG* covers gliding across her *Vogue Stitch* machine.



Dorothy and Rachel at the farm.

She took the idea (and in her usual way) began to run with it. The wheels were turning. She poured out design considerations...keep the size small enough to be easy to catch, large enough to be easily seen (she reckoned about 6" X 6"). It needed to be square giving four corners and a better chance to "snag" it. She guesstimated (correctly) that filling the bags about half full of beans would make them the right weight. The cover, she thought, should have a colorful print on one side, and a solid on the other...and hopefully there be a bonus trip down memory lane.

Creating intriguing designs and using fabrics that have high tactile characteristics were key parts of the process, but then the challenge of how to make the activity produce maximum results came.

The first round of questions were things like:

- Would the activity be seen as "childish"?
- How many can play?
- What if there are hand-eye coordination challenges?
- Could the event become "rough"...with people throwing too hard? If so, how should the behavior be modified?
- Is there a "*best time*" of the day for such an activity?
- Is the possibility of damage (lamps, glass, etc.) too great to play inside?

After conducting **BEAN BAGS** in dozens of care communities, in an incredibly wide variety of circumstances, we think we know the answers to most of the original questions. One thing we know for sure: *the activity has been a hit from day one*. It is a continual source of amazement to watch how quickly **BEAN BAGS** totally engage everybody in the room. *The exercise is fun and invigorating*.

Configurations of the participants appears to be a non-issue. Sometimes we form a circle...in the living room or outside in the backyard when the weather is nice. We use them in one-on-one activity, or in small groups. The participation value drops if the group becomes too large, so when many wish to join, we simply form more groups...depending upon how many facilitators are available.

We have often noticed that folks want to be sure everyone is included...*they toss a bag to someone who often "stays on the sidelines."* A good sense of community grows during this kind of large group activity.

Very early we started to see a deeper social connection. **BEAN BAGS** are a wonderful vehicle for non-verbal communication. *We noticed the folks tossing the bag gently to a friend...almost like delivering a very special gift*. Those who have the most difficulty putting words together can deliver the message, "I like you" by tossing the bag to a favorite person.

We soon realized that **BEAN BAGS** are far more than meets the eye. Dr. Tom Kitwood wrote of six basic needs of those with dementia. **BEAN BAGS** is an opportunity to meet so many of the basic needs...hitting five of the six...*Identity, Inclusion, Attachment, Comfort, and Love*. Participants feel:

- The comfort and joy of laughing with friends (stress-free, non-verbal communication)
- Included in a group setting with easy participation

When we were visiting a facility in Florida, one of the ladies would sing the words "*I'll be loving you, always!*" just before every throw. *The bean bag gave Rose a new way to connect with her world*...choices about with whom she wanted to interact as well as great fun and laughter in the process.

One evening in another part of the country, Mel joined the circle to play for the first time. He carefully felt the beans inside the bag with his fingers. As he tossed it across the circle he said (with a gleam in his eye), “*Now if only we had a slab of ham we’d have ourselves a feast!*” Good fun...good memories of ham and beans...and probably some hot cornbread with butter...and...oh well, that’s another story.

Dorothy is recovering from a recent fall. Myra, also a superb seamstress, is now producing gobs of beautiful bags (e.g., the ones below).



The latest versions of the bags are true to Dorothy’s (correct) belief that fabrics that have patterns reminiscent of material from childhood (and early days of sewing) get immediate attention. Myra’s covers include a variety of fabrics with “high touch value”...like corduroy, seed sack material, gingham, flannel, etc.

We experimented with filling materials. We began with pinto beans because they weighed about the right amount and made that old and familiar sound when they landed in hands...or on the floor. We have since tried buckwheat, wheat berries and flax. Most recently Myra began experimenting with plastic pellets.

We’re arranging to have some research conducted using a bit more scientific method than we have used. We mostly sit down with a group of elders we have never met, invite them to join us, and in a matter of minutes have them involved and laughing...and we just carefully pay attention to what happens.

We’ve had wonderful moments when grandchildren have come to visit and **BEAN BAGS** became an instant connection point for involvement with Grandma or Grandpa. One little person spontaneously created her own customized version of an activity. Maddie gathered up enough bags for each elder in the circle to have one. She positioned herself in the center, tossed one bag to each person, then caught and stacked them as the elders tossed them back to her. That was a **huge** hit.

We want to know more about this potentially important use of **BEAN BAGS**.

We want to know more about communication skills needed by care givers who have little formal training in conducting activities with those who have dementia. We would like data showing correlations between **BEAN BAGS** before meals and enjoyment of the dining event.

There’s still plenty to learn, but we have some big pieces of the puzzle in place.



We can show you how to create moments of joy with a low tech, no mess, easy to store activity...**BEAN BAGS**.

You can start having a great time now. We will put all the scientific stuff on our website when we have it.

Oh, and if you don't want to mess with making the things, we sell them.

Just call us, and we'll arrange shipment from Myra's "**production facility**" which sits peacefully surrounded by Iowa corn fields.

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