

# Black Seniors Test 'Power of Reminisce' to Protect Aging Brain

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AP Medical Writer

**S**haron Steen dons her tennis shoes and, with two fellow seniors, walks streets that in her youth were a vibrant center of Portland, Oregon's African-American community. Wasn't this the corner where an NAACP march began in 1963? Look, the record store is now a fancy high-rise.

It's more than a stroll down memory lane. Steen enrolled in a small but unique study to see if jogging memories where they were made can help older African Americans stay mentally sharp and slow early memory loss.

"What we find when we walk, all of us, is that there are a lot of things we haven't had to remember, and that we can't remember. And then as we walk and talk, the memories pop up and it's reassuring that they're still there," Steen said.

It's part of a new and growing effort to unravel troubling disparities: Why do Black seniors appear twice as likely as Whites — and Hispanics 1½ times — to develop Alzheimer's and other dementias?

A crucial first step is motivating more underrepresented populations to volunteer for research. African Americans make up less than 5 percent of participants in studies of cognitive decline and dementia,

according to the Alzheimer's Association.

Beyond possibly improving their own brain health, the Portland study's enticement is a chance to help preserve community and cultural memories from historically black neighborhoods that are disappearing with gentrification.

"A lot of our wisdom and stories about what community means comes from our elders," said Raina Croff, an assistant neurology professor at Oregon Health & Science University. She leads the SHARP study — it stands for Sharing History through Active Reminiscence and Photo-Imagery.

Three times a week, 21

**“There's something different that happens as you walk through the space and talk about memories**

seniors gather in groups of three and reminisce during mile-long walks through streets once filled with Black-owned homes and businesses, areas that in the last 20 years have become majority White. Along the way, "memory markers" — signs or historic photos — prompt "do you remember" conversations about people, events or long-gone landmarks, conversations recorded both for the study and for an oral archive.

Walking is healthy, and

being social increasingly is thought critical for seniors' brain health. Adding reminiscence is novel, although some previous research found simply looking through old family photos sometimes sparks memories in dementia patients. Some of the SHARP study participants, like Steen, are cognitively normal for their age; others have early memory problems or what's called mild cognitive impairment. Tests of brain function before and after the six-month program will show if it makes a difference.

It's an innovative way to test what's essentially exercising memory "when you still have a lot of brain left," said Maria

Carrillo, chief science officer at the Alzheimer's Association, which is funding the SHARP study.

Croff's theory: "There's something different that happens as you walk through the space and talk about memories."

It's not clear why African-Americans face extra risk of dementia. Higher rates of chronic health conditions such as high blood pressure and diabetes, known to be toxic to the brain, don't fully explain the dispar-

ity to name a few.

Here, he's found a novel way to recreate the historic evacuation. Instead of having the docudrama revolve around a single protagonist or a single unit, he has deftly interwoven a half-dozen or so discrete storylines highlighting the different perspectives of a number of unsung heroes. Whether on land, by sea or in the air, many among this patriotic band of brothers survive, but some do make the ultimate sacrifice in the valiant stand against the unspeakable evil spreading across Europe.

Shot in 70mm, "Dunkirk" is an instant classic worth the extra investment to catch on an IMAX screen. An inspirational tribute to Britain's Greatest Generation that just might be Chris Nolan's best picture yet.

Excellent ★★★★★

Rated PG-13 for intense battle scenes and some profanity



In this photo taken July 6, 2017, from left, Ron Young, Gahlana Easterly and Sharon Steen and reminisce as they take a mile-long walk through North Portland, Oregon, streets that once were full of Black-owned homes and businesses. Researchers are studying whether jogging memories where they were made can help African-American seniors stay sharp and slow early memory loss.

ity.

Studies presented at the Alzheimer's Association International Conference last week show a growing interest in the role of social and environmental influences, from living in disadvantaged neighborhoods to socioeconomic disparities in early childhood.

One particularly striking study suggests highly stressful experiences — the death of a child, abuse or severe illness, being fired or divorced — can age the brain before its time. University of Wisconsin-Madison researchers tested cognitive functions that decline with age in still

healthy volunteers in their 50s and 60s. Each particularly traumatic event over a lifetime added the equivalent of 1½ years of age-related decline — even more, four years, for African Americans, who experienced disproportionately more

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## Dunkirk

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artillery and Luftwaffe bombs. At 7 p.m. that evening, the desperate British prime minister decided to issue an urgent appeal to private boat owners to join the rescue effort.

By dawn, over 800 hundred vessels had been pressed into service. The improbable flotilla included everything from speed boats and yachts to tugboats and fishing trawlers to ferries and ocean liners.

For the next nine days, they negotiated their way back and forth across the U-Boat infested waters of the English Channel. And although about a third of the ships would be sunk by the enemy, the altruistic patriots managed to save 338,226 troops.

Leave it to Winston Churchill to put a positive spin on such a devastating military defeat, which claimed the lives

of 68,000 British soldiers and left the country in fear of an imminent invasion. On June 4, he took to the floor of the House of Commons to deliver a rousing speech assuring the alarmed citizenry that there was no doubt that Great Britain would ultimately prevail.

"Whatever the cost may be," he said in a stirring summation, "We shall fight on the beaches... We shall fight on the landing grounds... We shall fight in the fields and in the streets... We shall fight in the hills..." concluding, "We shall never surrender!"

All of the above has been chronicled in unique fashion in "Dunkirk," a visually-captivating World War II epic directed by Christopher Nolan. Nolan, the best British director besides Alfred Hitchcock never to win an Oscar, has made a string of memorable movies that includes "Memento," "Inception," "Interstellar" and the Batman tril-

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