I am a graduate student in physical therapy at a southeastern university. My graduate research project has been a bigger challenge than I’d anticipated: increasing physical activity in older adults with memory loss. One obstacle that makes this project particularly tough is that the older adults I’m working with have severedementia and Alzheimer’s disease. They all require assistance with caring for themselves, and they all live in a Medicaid-funded assisted living facility near my home and university. As a result, I have had some trouble finding activities that help me connect through the dementia and into the individual person that is still within.

Luckily, I had two sources of inspiration that lead me to Paradise Dolls. First, there was my own grandmother. She has mild dementia, but she loves her beautiful Adora doll, who she named after my mother who gave her the doll in 2005. Second, one of the residents in the assisted living facility asked me if I could bring her paper dolls. “Paper dolls?” I asked, tentatively, since this particular resident is often frustrated by fine motor tasks such as ones that would involve holding thin pieces of paper. “Paper dolls, dolls, any kind of dolls,” she replied. “Absolutely, I will bring you a doll,” I promised.

I brought 4 dolls to the assisted living facility on February 18, and the response was amazing. An older gentleman helped me open one of the boxes. I asked him if he wanted to take the baby doll out and hold her, but he said he’d just hold the box and look at her.

I took the baby with the owl and blanket to the resident who had originally asked me for paper dolls. “It’s a baby, a baby doll?” she asked, “For me?”
“Yes, this baby doll needs you to love it,” I said.
Her smile was so wide, bright, and beautiful as she held out her arms to take the baby, squeeze it to her chest, and then kiss its face over and over. This lady, who I will call Ms. Margaret, then rocked her baby, singing ‘Rock-a-bye Baby’. She asked me what the baby’s name was, and I told her she could name him. She continued cooing and loving the doll as I went to share a doll with another resident.

I wasn’t sure if ‘Ms. Delores’ would want to hold a doll. She has painful arthritis and uses a wheelchair for mobility, so she is protective of her body and typically declines participation in activities, no matter how simple or how soothing they may seem. I asked Ms. Delores if she wanted to hold a baby, and she said, sheepishly, “Ok.” She smiled, when I handed her the doll, cradling it in her elbow and gazing at it lovingly.

Ms. Janet was very ready and willing to care for a baby doll. She inspected her baby carefully, checking to see that its clothes were fastened and that its hair was neat. She then picked up her baby and carried it around as she did other “chores,” walking around the room and ensuring that all things were in their places.

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I hadn’t seen Ms. Margaret in several weeks, so I was excited to ask how she was doing. “My baby is in my room!” she told me. I typically re-introduce myself each week when I visit the assisted living facility. I was surprised that Ms. Margaret remembered not only me, but also that I was associated with her baby doll. “How is your baby?” I asked her in reply. “He’s good, he’s a good baby,” she replied, proudly.