

I was 7 years old when my father was diagnosed with having Early-Onset Alzheimer's Disease. At the time I didn't really know what that meant. I only knew that my father was changing and life was not going to be the same.

My mother explained it to me by saying dad might forget things that he normally wouldn't forget, like Dory from *Finding Nemo*. Just like Dory, he may repeat himself and not remember what we talked about. There would be many "Dory moments" to come. Just like the famous Disney fish, my dad enjoyed life and relished the company of friends and family. Even if he didn't always remember who you were or where you were going. Dory and my Dad had a lot in common.

Before all of this started, my father, simply put, had been my hero. He and I had our own private club, and we went on many adventures that included only the two of us. Special adventures where we went to exotic restaurants, like doughnut shops, where we ate chocolate covered doughnuts for breakfast. Or we went to the local Chinese restaurant for my favorite dinner of pot stickers and dim sum. We would spend hours talking and discussing the world's most important issues. Like how I had done on the spelling test or what we were doing in Brownies.

Dad loved going on walks. This is a fact that any who knew him held to be true. Any time there was a free second, he was quick to suggest "Does anyone want to go on a walk?" It didn't matter where we were or what time of day it was. I've never met anyone else with

the same enthusiasm for wandering aimlessly that the two of us have. I guess it's just one of those father and daughter things.

I vividly remember taking day trips into the city to go to museums. There we would see dinosaur skeletons and tar pits and imagine what the dinosaurs were thinking. We could make up some pretty wild stuff. Afterward we would play on the swings and slides outside the museum. I remember going into the gift shop and my Dad saying I could pick out one of the toy dinosaurs to take home. I picked the biggest one I could find and my Dad didn't blink an eye as he pulled the cash from his pocket. I still have it today and it always makes me smile.

My most vivid memory and our most frequent activity was spending time on the beach together. We lived across the street from the ocean and we would walk for miles up and down the seashore picking up seashells, making sandcastles, and talking about the creatures of the sea. Our family dog would swim out to meet the human surfers and would bodysurf into the shore with the waves. These are the precious memories I choose to keep. These are the ones that keep me in touch with who my father really was and how much he truly loved me.

But these are not the only memories I have of my father. There other memories that are much less fun. Seeing him struggle with everyday life was hard. Watching him struggle to find a word or a try to remember something he once knew. My father evolved into a pale

facsimile of who he had been. One minute he was doing something with purpose and in the next minute, he couldn't remember what it was he was doing. These are the memories that hurt and cause me to reflect on my father's life before Alzheimer's.

I know that my Dad was smart. He had a PhD in law, and for a number of years had his own legal practice. He was a self-taught engineer and he owned and ran an aerospace company. He just loved the work he was doing and it showed. To me the saddest part of the disease, was that all of the things he worked so hard to accomplish were slowly taken away by something he had no control over: a simple little disease called Alzheimer's. Unfortunately, it's anything but simple.

There are a large number of misunderstandings surrounding Alzheimer's. Most often I come across people who are confused by the fact that my father had Alzheimer's in his 50s. There is a big misconception that Alzheimer's is a disease that just affects old people. According to the Alzheimer's Association, over 200,000 people in the United States have Early-Onset Alzheimer's. In my family there are two people who have it. My cousin Leon's wife was also affected when she was in her mid-50's. What are the odds that my little family would have two completely unrelated people that were both affected? Apparently the odds are higher than one would think.

My father was lucky enough to respond exceptionally well to his medications. Before treatment, my dad had trouble with all sorts of daily tasks like putting a key in a lock, tying his shoes, and he couldn't figure out how to use a spoon to feed himself. The medications

they prescribed allowed him to regain a lot of his abilities. And he did quite well for quite a while and was even able to return to work. The medications were good but eventually the positive effects of the medications started to decrease and his memory declined once again.

As his abilities were declining, I had to learn some new skills. I now had to do things that I never thought I would need to do, like holding his hand in crowd so he wouldn't get lost, or being the one that had to look for cars while we walked across the street, or helping him to put his jacket on when we went outside. Now, our roles were reversed. I was happy to help him even though it was strange to see my dad, someone who I looked up to, not being able to do daily tasks by himself.

When the disease progressed to the point that dad could no longer take care of himself, my older sister Robyn took on a lot of responsibility. She managed his finances and found him a place to live where he could be properly supervised. We would go and visit him and take him to dinner. We would seek out restaurants that served his favorite food. Which was pretty much anything Italian and dripping in red sauce.

He died at the young age of 59. When we received the call that he had died, it was a shock. I had not known that his condition had drastically changed and that he was having seizures. My brother called and said things weren't looking good. Within hours he was gone.

So, you might be wondering what exactly I've learned from this experience. For one thing I know how fragile and precious life can be, and just how quickly it can change. For me, understanding that has been a gift. Some kids might take their parents for granted. I know differently, and I let my family know that I love them and appreciate them being there.

The other positive outcome of this ordeal would be my deep interest in medical science. Because I watched my father struggle with Alzheimer's and my mother battle cancer, I developed a fascination with watching the medical professionals decide what kind of treatment was the appropriate course. Since then I have poured over research in the subject in hopes of having a better understanding. Today I'm looking to study biochemistry and biotechnology in the hopes of applying it to medicine. Who knows? Maybe one day, I'll even be able to do some good for the other 200,000 with Early-Onset Alzheimer's Disease.

Submitted by Kyra Carbone 2017

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