

The summer before my junior year of high school I began my first job at a nursing home serving food and keeping the residents entertained. I expected this to be a job, a way to make money. What I did not expect was what it would teach me about love.

Before I began working with people with Alzheimer's and dementia diagnoses, I knew very little about its effects. I knew that older people are at risk and that their memory is affected. My uncle had dementia and was put in a home, but I was too young and too removed from his life to understand the devastating effects it had on him as well as his wife. He went from calling me Sally-Mae as a joke to seriously not knowing my name.

On my first day as an Alzheimer's Certified Activities Aide, I put in a movie and sat next to a man who seemed very kind. I told him small tidbits about myself, and that I was nervous because it was my first day on the job. He reassured me that I would do great and told me about himself. The conversation was superficial but it went well. He asked me what my name was for a second time, so I told. It did not strike me as strange until the third time, and countless times following. After I had the same conversation with him three times in the half hour, I realized that I was not fully aware of the vast extent of Alzheimer's.

Slowly but surely I connected with each one of the residents. Getting to know a person with dementia is challenging because a lot of who they are comes from their past experiences, experiences that they may not recall. Family of the residents would fill me in on their lives in the best way they could. I was told about what they enjoyed doing, where they traveled, what they did for a job. On a good day, the residents and I would strike a conversation about their past. I cherish the days that I got to connect with the residents on a more personal level. A usually quiet man told me all about cars and his fifty year employment with General Electric. A man and his

wife told me about the years they spent driving an RV cross country, sparked by the Map of America puzzle we were doing together. Another man began to tell me about war, but stopped himself because he found it too horrific to put on another person's shoulders. I felt like I was chipping away at the story of their lives, hearing their experiences made me appreciate the life I have and have left to live, the love I have left to give.

One of the most profound stories involves a couple that were not allowed to be together, although they were in the same nursing home. She was constantly caring for him at the risk of her own safety making it dangerous to live together. The couple, both in their nineties, were eventually able to stay together. Once they were reunited, they did not leave each other's side. They made sure to go to time their days so that they would always be together, from the moment they woke up to the time they went to bed. My fondest memory of the two was when I told them that I had to move her to her own side of the table for dinner as he asked to leave her there because anywhere not next to him was too far. He was constantly struck by her beauty, seventy years later. "Isn't she the most beautiful woman you've ever seen?" was uttered daily. The genuinity of the statement lingers in my mind. Even though neither of them could remember much, they remembered that they loved each other and that they never wanted to be apart. Their love was always there, but it was jumbled by Alzheimer's. So much had been taken from the two of them, but it left their love for each other unscathed.

I entered their room to her freshly made bed and a black suit laying on his bed for the funeral. He was sitting in a chair, staring at the bed of his late wife. The day after she passed we sat together as he recounted the decades since he met her, the best parts of his life. He told me about how he proposed at eighteen before he went off to war, her favorite flowers and how she

was the best thing that ever happened to him. Her death brought him clarity in a world of haze. The pain of his loss ignited his memory and connected the puzzle, the puzzle of their everlasting love story. They have been together through war and peace, love and loss, and sickness and health. They taught me, a seventeen year old girl, what love is and what love should be. They taught me that being together is what matters, that loving each other through everything and not giving up on each other is what matters in this life.

Love is sitting and eating lunch with your mom on your lunch break, making sure your dad's coffee is hot and sneaking him extra pie, and calling your sister from across the country because you do not want her think she's forgotten. It is going to your spouse's nursing home with the knowledge that they do not know who you are so you can eat lunch together. Love is sitting for hours with your mom, telling her about your day while knowing that she cannot answer you. Love is willingly feeding your spouse their meals when just months ago they played checkers, and always won. Love is sitting in the same room, everyday, all day, just to make sure that your spouse knows they are loved and not forgotten. Love is not giving up on love.

Love is having to make the decision to put your family member in a home because it is in their best interest, not the easiest way out. It is taking care of your husband until you cannot anymore, until you begin to need help yourself. Love is sitting in the activities room, talking to a seventeen year old girl about your life together and how hard it is to see your husband slowly forget who you are. Marriage is "in sickness and in health" and an Alzheimer's diagnosis is a true test of the vows people make when they are young and healthy. It is not when it is most convenient, but when it is hard, it is being there for the person you love when they need you most.

The man I sat next on my very first day did not ever get a visitor, and he was not the only one. I saw people live out their lives by themselves without anybody familiar to comfort them when they were scared. Residents would yell and scream, asking why their family put them there or ask where they were and when they got to leave. Knowing that these people had nobody who cared enough to come visit or call is what made me love my job. I was able to be that person for so many people. I could come into work and greet them as if I had known them my entire life. I would talk to them for hours about nothing and make sure that they were not forgotten. That is what I want to do with my life. I want to make sure that people know that they are not forgotten, that they are special, and that somebody loves them.

So many people are so concerned with material possessions, but the only stories I ever heard were love stories. I was never told about the fancy cars or big houses because sitting at the home, nearing the end of their lives, all the residents cared about was who they loved and who loved them. The memories outweighed the things, and that is what is important.

I truly believe that while so much of who these people are is being ripped away from them, the love they feel is always there. Love may not always be present. It is broken into pieces like a puzzle, but when the puzzle pieces connect, nothing is more beautiful. Through thick and thin, love is what matters.