

Confusion, heartbreak, and loss are some words that describe the unfortunate impact that Alzheimer's disease has had on my life. However, words like growth, loyalty, and value of life describe what I gained. Alzheimer's disease has had an impact on me since I was a very young child and is part of what has made me who I am today. My great-grandmother began to be affected by Alzheimer's disease before I was born, so my only memories with her were of when she was sick. For about a year and a half, before she was moved into a nursing home, my great-grandmother began to show signs of dementia. Gradually, daily tasks became more and more difficult for her to accomplish. She began forgetting whether or not she took her medicine and she often got lost or could not remember how to get home. The decision of whether or not to move her into a nursing home fell largely on my mother. This was due to my grandmother not taking any responsibility for my great-grandmother and her illness. As an adult daughter, my grandmother was not able to cope with the drastic changes happening. Because of how much my mom loved my great-grandmother, she became her primary caregiver while she was pregnant and worried about her own family as well. The whole time she was pregnant with me, my mother paid the medical bills, kept my great-grandmother from getting lost, kept track of the weekly appointments and grocery shopping, and much more. She was forced to do many of these things on her own because my grandmother could not confront her mother's condition. She lived out of state and could not bring herself to face what was happening. Eventually the decision was made to move my great-grandmother into a nursing home at the age of 82. While she was still fairly independent, she required the assistance of nurses in order to keep her safe. Moving her into the nursing home forced my grandmother to realize the gravity of her mother's illness and overcome her denial.

As I grew up, I learned how to aid in taking care of my great-grandmother as well. Even though I was very young, I started to understand just how sick she truly was. I understood that she could not remember who I was, since every visit became a new introduction. I also understood that she did not know where she was since she would "go shopping," and steal belongings from other residents' rooms. It was scary to see her in such a confused state, but I knew that spending time with her was helpful. She always calmed down when I was there, and she always told me that she loved me, even when she could not remember my name. As a child I had a hard time being willing to go visit my great-grandmother because I did not enjoy going to the nursing home. It was a scary experience for me to be in that kind of environment as often as I was. I did not enjoy the number of confused elderly people who would approach me without warning. I was not used to so many people touching me or just walking up and talking to me as if I were their grandchild. However, I had to get used to spending time in the nursing home even if I was scared or was reluctant to be there.

Learning how to adapt to an unfamiliar, unnerving situation like that taught me a lot about loyalty, overcoming fear, and respect for elderly people who are sick or mentally disabled. I learned how to be compassionate even if someone does not understand who you are or cannot get to know you. This was true for all of the residents of the nursing home, but especially for my great-grandmother. Her last name was Bearinger, so we all called her Nana Bear. She loved being called that, and the classic "teddy bear" became what we all remember her by. She was given at least one teddy bear on every special occasion, and had them everywhere throughout her room. She loved her teddy bears and now we hold on to them as reminders of her. Throughout my childhood, we did our best to visit my great-grandmother every week as a family. These

visits not only helped my great-grandmother, but helped my family as a whole. These visits helped us all develop a closeness and unity during that time. We shared the burden, which made it not seem like a burden. We spent so much time in the nursing home in fact, that most of the significant events of my childhood were celebrated there. My annual piano recital was held there, as well as almost all of our family birthdays. We all loved her and created special bonds with her up until the day she died. She passed away at age 93; I was 12 years old.

Some might argue that Alzheimer's disease takes away meaning in a person's life. On the contrary, Alzheimer's disease can bring meaning to people's lives in a way that no one expects. It is still very hard to not have known her when she was healthy because of the loving impact she had on the people around her. She was the oldest of six daughters raised during The Great Depression, married a navy officer who served in WWII, and raised two children. Later she raised my mom and uncle when my grandmother needed help as a single parent. Serving her family was how my great-grandmother lived her life. Alzheimer's created an opportunity for our family to serve her in return.

My future plans include becoming an elementary special education teacher. As a teacher, I will ensure that my students learn the same things that I learned from having a family member with Alzheimer's disease. I want to teach my students how to respect and care for elderly people, and put in the effort to show that they care. I want to take my students on field trips to let them experience the compassion that I was able to develop while taking care of my great-grandmother. I want to give children as many opportunities as possible to become comfortable around people who have illnesses such as Alzheimer's disease or dementia. For many children, as with me, it is scary to be around people with these types of illnesses because they are unpredictable and are not fully aware of their actions. However, through exposure and leading by example, I can allow my students to become comfortable in unfamiliar and often frightening places.

The impact that Alzheimer's disease had on my life through my great-grandmother's journey is something that can never be replaced or recreated. It taught me to love unconditionally, to honor family bonds, and to do what is necessary even through scary situations. It means the absolute world to me that I was able to care for her and make her smile while she was alive. Despite her illness, I was able to create a special bond with my great-grandmother. Through coping with Alzheimer's disease, I have learned how to truly value my life and the people in it. I have learned how necessary it is to cherish the time that we have left with our family and friends. I have also learned that nothing is pointless when it comes to helping people with Alzheimer's disease. Even if they do not remember us, it means more to offer dignity and respect for their lives than to simply acknowledge or recognize them. A simple smile or holding a hand can mean the world to a person with Alzheimer's disease, so we should always put in the extra effort to provide them even the smallest of comforts.