

Growing up, I was aware of what Alzheimer's disease was and its effect on people. But it wasn't until my freshman year of high school that its meaning truly came into effect. Before that, I had been blissfully ignorant of sickness, disease, and death, and the impact they have on families. All three of my grandparents had been relatively healthy, no sign of any real danger looming over their heads. That is until we found out that, no; not quite all of our grandparents were healthy. My grandmother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. I'll be honest, the news didn't exactly shock or surprise me. I'll be even more honest and say I wasn't devastated or sad, or really any emotion close to it. Despite my grandmother living only a 30 minute drive away, we weren't close. She had always been quiet, reserved. To this day, I still can't recall a genuine, one on one conversation with her. So instead of grieving, I proceeded on with my life, cheerfully content in my little sphere of indifference.

As the years went by, her symptoms increased. I heard my parents talking about it more and more, and having to coach us on what to do in certain situations, if they should ever come up. Her safety and well-being became a major concern, and my grandpa constantly was to keep an eye on her. Finally, during my sophomore year, tragedy struck the other side of my family. My dad's mother, who I had been exceptionally close with, passed away due to a tumor in her brain. Like my other grandmother, she'd been suffering for a long time, her pain had just passed obviously over our heads. At this point, I started to realize I didn't really have a grandmother anymore. One had passed away, and the other didn't know who I was.

Symptoms worsened. My grandmother, who had previously always been very independent, couldn't be trusted to go on walks by herself anymore, or cook by herself, or go to the library. My grandfather became tied to her side 24/7, having to help her with all her daily tasks. It got to the point where she couldn't dress herself or go to the bathroom anymore without supervision.

She'd always been very docile, I can't remember a time where she lashed out at anyone, or showed really any sign of anger, annoyance or disapproval. So it was a bit of a shock when she began to fight against my grandpa, who was trying his best to help her. She became irritable, annoyed, and would argue and get angry with my grandpa in front of us. Sometimes my parents would have to intervene and calm my grandmother down, and take care of her until she settled down back into her old self. The words "care facility" and "nursing homes" became more and more frequent, at first spoken in whispers, then casually voiced around the dinner table.

It was inevitable that it should happen. My grandfather fought hard to keep her, but his energy was slowly getting drained by having to monitor her every hour. Finally, he agreed that a nursing home would be the best home for her, where she could be safe and around professionals in an environment built for her. I have no doubt it was hard for him. They'd lived together for more than 50 years, having nothing but each other's company. No one would ever willingly and happily send off their soul-mate to a new home 30 minutes away.

Due to the lack of medical resources in their small town, she came to ours. My parents spent hours going over medical care homes, determined to give her only the best. They moved her down to an estate that was a seven minute drive away from our house, close enough to reach her if anything should ever happen. Life went on. I entered my junior year of high school, got a job, and involved myself in school sports. I lived like any typical high school kid, paying no attention

to the disease that was shattering my grandparents' world. It wasn't until my senior year of high school that my world started to really expand and I started to pay attention to and respect my grandfather and what he did to help my grandmother and her disease.

The lengths he went to care for her still amaze me. He was there with her from the beginning, and stuck by her side every step of the treatment. Even when she kept him up at night. Even when she pushed him away and refused to let him help her. Even when she no longer resembled the woman he met so long ago, the woman who he had fallen in love with and started a family. To me, that's an entirely different genre of love. That's a selfless, pure sort of love, a love stretching on further than just romantic or platonic. That kind of love, that kind of devotion, was foreign to me before I witnessed my grandma's downfall. It surprised me. It still surprises me.

As a teenager who's been in my fair share of relationships, I've never experienced anything even close to the love and utter devotion that my grandpa has for my grandma. That's love at a whole other stage in life. It really makes you question; after the thrill of new love has worn off, after the honeymoon phase, after being together for years, are they still going to love you? Are they still going to be loyal, and by your side, even in sickness or in health, as the marriage vow decrees? When your body wilts away, and your body begins to sink into old age, will they still love you the same? Thanks to my grandpa, I can say: yes. That kind of love does exist, and it's still very prominent today, if you only open your eyes and see it.

The selflessness and kindness given to my grandmother wasn't just limited to my grandpa. My mother would visit her at least once a day, take her to see shows, go on a daily walk, to attend mass, or go on breakfast dates. Even though my grandma could barely speak and didn't know who she was, my mom remained patient and true to her cause. Despite her memory being lost, the mother-daughter relationship still flourished.

Quite honestly, my grandma was given a plethora of support, from her husband, to her children, to her friends, and to her grandchildren. It really is touching to see people rally together to support one another. The kind of love that my grandpa, and my mother, and my aunts and uncles give her is selfless. They know she can give them nothing in return, not even a glance of recognition, but they give anyway. They love her because she's their mother, their spouse, their friend. Instead of trying to live in the good old days, and get lost in nostalgia, they live for the moment, and they make these memories the special ones. They treasure the time they have with her now, and make the best out of a heartbreaking, terrible situation.

I've also started to look into my grandma's life, and examine her from a whole new perspective. Lately, my family has been really starting to open up about her, about how she was when they were growing up, and who she was before her disease. She was a stay at home mother of five during the day, and a nurse for the local hospital during night shifts. She was always on her feet, always doing something, never taking a sick day in her life. She loved watching football, loved to travel, and always took the time to bake every kid a pie on their birthday. Learning all this was almost like meeting a new person, someone I'd never encountered before. The reason I'd never really had a relationship with my grandma was that she had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's before I was even born. Because of her disease, I had entirely missed out on the opportunity of having a relationship with her, and the chance to truly meet her.

There were positives that arose out of the negative, however. To this day, my grandpa is still the most selfless person I know. Having my grandma diagnosed brought to light a new side of him, a side I'd used to overlook. He is honestly the only person I know who gives and gives and gives, yet expects nothing in return. It's a bit odd, that something that would be seen as a tragedy was almost the opposite for my family. Our bond improved drastically, instead of falling apart, we fell together, and leaned on each other to support and love my grandmother. I may have lost a grandma, but I gained a relationship with not only my grandpa, but my aunt and uncles, and my parents. And that kind of relationship is special. It's....selfless.