

Imagine a muscular distinguished elder with bright white hair, who commands the room when he walks in. Years of playing professional Negro League Baseball, well into his late forties, with players like Satchel Paige, Josh Gibson and Larry Dobe, had left him strong as he aged. Years of combatting Jim Crow, being spat on, called boy while wearing his Navy uniform, and relegated to an eighth-grade education, had left him strong in mind yet full of grace and poise. And that voice. That baritone espresso rich voice addressing me as, “My dear fellow” as if he were Prince Charles from England, not William “Sonny” Randall from Hampton, Virginia. That voice always found an audience, sometimes willing spectators and sometimes captive (i.e. in a restaurant, at the doctor’s office or even an elevator) to hear him belt out Frank Sinatra’s greatest hits. “And now, the end is near, and so I face the final curtain”, was one of his favorites—My Way. Admittedly, I was embarrassed because he would just start singing. Anywhere. Everywhere, without inhibition. When I lifted my head from wanting to crawl into a corner, I saw startled patrons, patients and staff would be listening with rapt attention, delighted by his tone, pitch and voice quality at 92 years old. My shame turned into pride as I saw how much joy he brought to people. That’s my Papa. Wise, wonderful, gentle, a man of few words but who commanded quiet power.

Once Papa and Grandma moved in with us, I began filling the role of afternoon caregiver—making sure they ate, were safe and comfortable--after school. An avid reader, Papa was well versed in world affairs and would have conversations for hours about how things used to be. He marveled at the opportunities that my brother and I had through education and often wondered aloud what life might have been like if only he had those opportunities. That’s one of the reasons I work so hard to succeed, to honor his own sacrifice and to prove that with a level playing field and opportunity, everyone can be great.

As time went on, conversations with Papa took strange turns. He would forget what day it was. He would get up in the middle of the night. Usually unphased by anything, he become irritated by small things. I don’t think any of us slept soundly for three years, always fearful he would tumble down the stairs in the dark. My room was directly across from his so I jumped up at the slightest sound of movement. Sleep deprivation took a toll on us all. At one point, we started leaving the previous day’s newspaper downstairs so that when he was prowling at night, he wouldn’t want to go outside in the dark to get the newspaper from the driveway, which would be dangerous. I thought our newspaper tactic was a cruel trick at first but sadly, he never noticed the date change or that he had read the same articles just a few hours earlier. We had to be clever like that, all the time.

At first, when Papa would dispute obvious facts, like we lived in DC not MD, or that he was due to drive the late Senator Ted Stevens to an appointment (like he did many years ago as a chauffeur), we would challenge him with the truth. “No, Papa, we live in Clarksville, MD.” He grew combative. My gentle giant grandfather became enraged and thought we were calling him a liar. That hurt me deeply. “Senator Stevens passed away, Papa, 3 years ago”, we’d say and it’s as if he was reliving the grief all over again. “Oh no.”, he replied, his face showing a frown. Painful, again. Some of the worst battles were over taking medication and changing his clothes. Over time we learned to tell little white lies to keep the peace. “Yes, Senator Stevens is waiting for you,” I learned to eek out of my mouth,

against all I was taught was right from wrong. And just like that, instead of a 30-minute heated back and forth, the conversation ended peacefully and he was on to the next topic.

Alzheimer's is a cruel, cruel disease. It's as if the person you love dies twice. There is grieving before there is grieving. And each milestone is a new low—forgetting dates, places, how to bathe and eat, and people. It robs you of the very essence of who you are. And it's as if a ghost is living with you. Sometimes I had to do my own reality check to see what world I was living in. I remember one summer day, Papa had my mom convinced that two young men, strangers, had stopped by the house and had “such a pleasant conversation”. When she probed whether it was my brother and me, “You mean Randall and Laurence?”, he was adamant, “No. Two young men from the neighborhood, sat right out there with me”, pointing to the patio. My mom asked everyone in the house whether they had seen Papa talking to anyone. When my brother and I said it was the two of us, she broke down and cried.

I grew sad that such a good man would face such a grim fate. I cried often as he deteriorated and eventually forgot my name and the tapestry of stories of his youth whose precious memories molded me into who I am today. His melodies still ring in my ear, like a legacy of life lessons. “Every time it rains it rains, pennies from heaven. Don't you know each cloud contains, pennies from heaven?” I find myself humming that when I've run into a bit of bad fortune and it cheers me up. “Oh Lord, my God, when I in awesome wonder, consider all the worlds Thy hands hat made...How great Thou art!”, is in my head when I see something amazing like Niagra Falls.

I expanded my responsibility helping Papa walk down the stairs--step-by-step or picking him up from the floor when he fell. Alzheimer's impacted us all. My dad strained his back lifting Papa and would go in his room and cry after realizing Papa, his own hero, was not the same. We all pitched in, helping him to bathe, use the toilet and get dressed. He was a proud man who had shriveled to near bones, so much so that his dentures no longer fit and his face grew gaunt. The very soul of him was somewhere else. And, after he passed away, I was simultaneously sad and relieved for him because the worst moments were when he realized something was wrong with him and he apologized for something he truly could not help. I would hug him. Reassure him. And tell him I love him. Devastation, indescribable heartache and a grave sense of loss accompanied me for a long time after Papa died.

Through this process I have learned about compassion, patience and that in the end, all you have is family. When I had conflicting demands on my time like practice for sports or school plays, I was tempted to rush Papa but didn't. I learned to appreciate the small things in life, like days when he was completely lucid, like the old Papa, if fleeting. My family came together, leaned on each other and strengthened each other by keeping humor going during tough moments and appreciating what each other did to help Papa. I learned it's OK to cry.

My life has forever changed because of Alzheimer's. I find myself looking for signs of it in my grandmothers and parents. I encourage them to keep their minds sharp, take vitamins and exercise. And I urge my friends to do the same with their parents. I happily rode the

pine on my football team to prevent CTE and early onset dementia. And I have contributed to fundraising efforts through my mom's sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha.

Whatever can be done to stop this cruel, debilitating, dehumanizing process, please find a cure. What families and the one diagnosed have to go through is heart-wrenching. Let there be no more ghosts of people we love living among us. PLEASE, for my grandfather's sake. Until I began writing this essay, I hadn't realized that I had never really identified my emotions about Papa and how much his life impacted me. I am truly grateful that I had the chance to care for him, show him how much I love him and maintain his dignity. "Respect, my dear fellow, is all you have in life", he would say. I hope I am earning his respect as I share a little bit about his life, our experience, and my desire to put an end to the disease that claimed his life.