

I took the bag of animal crackers from the pantry, filled a small bowl with them and set it on the table. My dad smiled at me and grabbed a couple to snack on. I turned on Casey Kasem's American Top 40 radio station on my phone. It was one of the programs that I listened to a lot with him when I was younger. My dad hummed along to some of the songs while he colored and sharpened his colored pencils. He only looked up occasionally to say something random and often incoherent to which I would smile and nod. I worked on my art class assignment while he colored and talked. He asked me, "Do you know about the..." he paused. "The thing with the stripes?" I had no idea what he was talking about, but I responded, "Yes! The thing with stripes!" He smiled like he won the lottery and said, "Right on!" He was always happy when he felt understood, a striking contrast to when people pressed him for more information about his inquiries, which ended in both parties confused and frustrated.

Later on that day my dad stopped his coloring to look up at me and asked, "What's your name?" At first I thought I didn't hear him right, so I asked him what he said and when he repeated the question, I stated my full name without hesitation and gave him a goofy smile. At my last name he smiled and said "What a coincidence!" At this, I in turn asked him his name, as if this were an introduction, as if he wasn't there when I was born, when he helped name me seventeen years ago. "What's your name?" He paused. He looked to the wall and after what felt like an hour he said, "I don't know." I did hesitate that time, but only for a heartbeat before I stated his full name for him. I ran over to the desk and grabbed a couple of index cards and in big letters that he would be able to read without his glasses, I wrote his name. He read it under his breath a couple of times before taking a colored pencil and tried writing it himself. My mom said one day that she thought it would be harder when my dad forgot his children's names rather than when he forgot her name. I disagreed. I thought that it would be harder when he forgot my mom's name, since he had known her nearly his whole life. I was wrong. It didn't occur to me that he could forget his own name. I could handle him asking me my name, but when he asked who he was, it nearly broke my heart.

My family relocated during my freshman year of high school, so that we would be closer to my dad's family, because of his diagnosis of Early-Onset Alzheimer's Disease. The change of scenery along with the progression of my dad's disease was like stepping into another life. I had trouble adjusting to new people, a new school, and an ever changing father.

As my dad's disease progressed the mood in our house began to shift. When my father put the dishes away in the wrong place or threw away clothes for unknown reasons, everyone was annoyed and confused, including my dad. After a few months of quarantining to avoid Covid-19, the isolation and stress along with the Alzheimer's progression altered the environment and brought on even more challenges at home. When my dad asked to call his mom who has been dead for nearly 20 years, the progression of Alzheimer's was hard to deny.

I used to think Alzheimer's disease is contagious. Not the disease itself of course, but the feelings, frustrations, and fears that the person who has it feels. Instead of one person in my house having Alzheimer's it sometimes feels like we are all suffering from it. Before he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, my dad never cried. Ever. Now he gets sad easily and cries without warning which brings me down faster than anything else ever could. More recently I've realized how wrong my theory about Alzheimer's being contagious was. I believe, in fact, that the opposite is true. Although his moods influence me and my family, I have discovered that how we interact with him influences him to an even greater degree. I've changed my tactics and ways of approaching him to be more positive and understanding even if I'm having a bad day or I am frustrated with much success.

It would be an understatement to say that Alzheimer's disease has affected my life. I've been forced to change my attitude, my behavior, my schedule, and my habits to be more compliant to my father and how I can help him, or help better his day. My mom has pointed out on multiple occasions that I probably do too much adapting for my dad's sake instead of mine, and perhaps she's right. What no one seems to understand is that he, regardless of Alzheimer's, is still my dad. On the days when he remembers who I am I am hopeful that me spending time with him means something to him and if nothing else spending time with him means something to me.

While he does forget his name from time to time, some pieces of my dad's character remain. His need to help someone who is distraught has not gone away. When I have a bad day and I try to hide it he still senses it. He asks if I am okay even if no one else will. If someone spills something or falls or gets hurt he goes to their aid even if he has no idea what to do. Being around him has encouraged me to pursue the personality trait of selflessness. My father has always been a happy person, and while some days he is so sad it tears me to pieces, he remains a mostly positive person which has always been inspiring to me.

When looking back at my experiences it is hard to pinpoint one thing that I have learned when coping with a father with Alzheimer's disease, besides learning how to provide daily caregiving to him. In spending time with my dad, watching him while my mom is at work, and just being someone that he can talk to, I have become a completely different person that a younger version of myself wouldn't recognize. I have to be extremely patient when helping my dad, and I've only gotten better at it as time passes. As I watch my dad's disease progress and steal his memories, I've learned to treasure mine and to not waste my time doing anything but what I truly want to do. My dad wasn't necessarily a 'creative' person before the diagnosis, but now when given water color paints he is my favorite artist which encourages me to try out new things. When people act negatively towards him, when they don't know he has Alzheimer's disease, it teaches me to see things from a different perspective. His disease has challenged me to be understanding

and compassionate in a way that only someone who has had to cope with something like Alzheimer's can be.

Someday, because of my unique situation, I hope to reach out and share my experiences with and inspire other young people who are dealing with a parent suffering from Early-Onset Alzheimer's Disease. Helping someone with Alzheimer's is hard, in part because the person you are helping has little to give in return. You can't help someone with Alzheimer's disease with the expectation of being rewarded for your generosity or your time. It is a fruitless endeavor, because there will be a point when they won't remember that you helped them. You do, however, gain the satisfaction of knowing that you were there for them when they needed you. It is because of my dad's selflessness that I continue to help him, and strive to be more like him every day.