

I remember the first time I noticed that something was a little off about my grandfather. He had come over to visit and he seemed particularly nervous about things. He seemed a bit unsure of where he was, although he had been here many times. He was overly concerned about where he had placed the book he was reading. He seemed confused about where or why we were going out to eat that night. I didn't think too much of it at the time assuming these were all functions of a man who was aging. However, as time passed, it became evident that these issues were not just a function of an elderly man growing old, but rather the result of a terrible disease that slowly, but surely erases the memory of those we love so dearly.

Although Alzheimer's disease was discovered over a century ago, it wasn't until recently that I learned how deep its effects run, not only on the person affected but on the whole family. Some of the significant signs of dementia that come with this terrible disease, I witnessed first-hand over the past several years. My grandfather, who was so skilled at handy-man work, went from being able to fix just about anything, to not even understanding why he was holding a hammer. An avid reader his whole life, my grandfather used to sit for hours and read an entire novel from start to finish. But in the past few years, his love of reading seemed to diminish significantly and I noticed he was much, much slower as he worked through his books.

The impact on my family, especially my grandmother, was even more prominent. I remember listening to my grandmother describe some of her day-to-day challenges dealing with my grandfather struggling with this disease. She described how difficult it was to make grandpa understand where he was going for the day. A simple trip to the grocery store was becoming more and more challenging. She spent more time worrying about keeping an eye on him in the store ensuring he didn't wander off than whether she was able to get all the items on her list. Simple tasks like getting dressed in the morning were becoming increasingly difficult and confusing for my grandfather, who was not a small man standing at 6'1". In the later stages of the disease, my grandmother lovingly helped my grandfather choose his clothes, aided him in getting them on correctly, and ensured his belt was correctly buckled.

Another challenge that all children face at some point in their life is when they must inevitably make the decision to remove the car keys from their parent's hands. With Alzheimer's disease, this issue becomes particularly problematic because the person with this disease doesn't understand why you are taking their freedom away. What makes it more problematic is not the initial discussion of why it is necessary for them to stop driving, but more due to the incessant need by the caregiver to explain this same idea over and over and over to those Alzheimer affected parents. I witnessed firsthand, my grandmother, my parents, and my aunt dealing with this situation. After my grandfather had a very minor fender-bender in the parking lot of a local grocery store, they decided it was too dangerous to let my grandfather drive anymore. After this incident, they had a lengthy discussion with my grandfather explaining their concerns regarding his more prominent and obvious memory loss issues and their concern for his safety as well as

others on the road. My grandfather took it surprisingly well, initially and agreed it was time to see a neurologist. The struggles ensued later when my grandmother had to repeatedly and incessantly inform my grandfather that he could no longer drive and that she was willing to take him wherever he needed to go. Her and my family's struggles continued when the time came for the neurologic examination. My aunt and grandmother took my grandfather to his first visit. After patiently explaining multiple times where they were going, and finally convincing my grandfather this was a necessary health visit, my grandfather relented and attended the appointment. My grandfather grew increasingly frustrated as he struggled through the barrage of tests set before him, some of which were simply cards asking him to name the object. Needless to say, this appointment opened my eyes to the reality of how significant this disease was and even more so to the extreme challenges that my family, particularly my grandmother, had ahead of us.

As if life caring for a dementia patient were not complicated enough, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States, it added a whole new level of complexity to an already sensitive disease that tests everyone's patience. As if it wasn't hard enough repeatedly informing your dementia-ridden loved one where you are going and why, it was much harder explaining to them why suddenly we could not go anywhere. Ironically, we had to constantly explain to my grandfather about this new deadly disease and why he had to stay home to protect himself, when the truly concerning disease was already ravaging his mental faculties. Then, to make things worse, my grandmother was challenged with ensuring he wore a mask if and when he went out, which extrapolated the confusion of every situation. My grandfather struggled with why he could no longer attend church in person as the TV just didn't cut it. He would insist on taking walks around the neighborhood, and my grandmother would follow him at a distance to ensure he did not get lost.

This past August, I was blessed with the opportunity to spend some quality time with my grandfather before he took a dramatic turn for the worse and lost his life to this disease on 31 August 2021. Although he wasn't the same grandpa I knew growing up, there were good days and bad days. On the good days, I took advantage of speaking to him about his life and we spent time reminiscing about the cool things he and I did when I was little, like when he taught me to shoot a BB gun and roasting marshmallows by the campfire. And even though I would not turn 18 until later that year, I sensed that we connected man-to-man for the first time and I got a chance to let him know I appreciated him and loved him very much.

If there is one thing I have learned through my experience with this disease is not to take time or your loved ones for granted. Spend the time with your loved ones now, and let them know how much they have impacted your life, as later might not be an option. This disease, as challenging as it is, brings out one's true character as a caregiver. To slowly and progressively watch a loved one slip away mentally, knowing there is no treatment or cure is excruciatingly painful for all

those dealing with this disease. Through the steadfast patience, compassion, and love displayed by my family, especially my grandmother, I have become aware that it is my duty and obligation to step up and care for those as they have cared for me.