

“Am I in the right place?” Helen would ask in her charming New York accent. “Yes Helen, you’re in the right place” I would reply. This dialogue would repeat around every fifteen minutes during my shift as a volunteer at the Beaumont Rehabilitation and Skilled Nursing Center, at which Helen was my favorite resident. My experiences at the Dementia Unit of the center slowly began to make a mark upon my personal growth, the way I looked at life, and the way I carried myself day to day.

After the death of my grandfather, who suffered in similar isolation to Alzheimer’s, trapped in his body and mind, I started reading about the disease: the gradual, terrifying dissolving of self, the isolation, the fear, the awful sense of fifty years of life, love and experience dissolving away, even as the person was still there. I found this terrifying but was also filled with a sense of compassion. At the same time, I was beginning to learn about the biological nature of this disease, and the awareness and compassion seemed to spur me even more. The idea that I could perhaps devote myself to this, in the form of research, began to take shape.

But first, I wanted to both serve in some capacity, and be a witness to the life of those who suffer from Dementia. I had spent much time writing papers on Alzheimer’s in my AP Biology class. However, until I volunteered at the center, the disease was just words on paper to me. As I comforted anxious seniors sliding into Dementia, and listened to them describe the remains of their memories, I got to experience these very real emotions of despair, hope, and love.

I distinctly remember my first day, as I was extremely nervous. I walked into the center with my hands shaking and sweating. The weeks of training I had undergone had emphasized the importance of speaking and behaving with very specific mannerisms so as to keep the residents at ease. I remember walking through the doors, reminding myself that the experience wouldn’t be even a fraction as disorienting as it is every day for the residents. Eventually, I familiarized myself with the center and the people, getting to know their stories, where they come from, and what makes them, them.

Within my first few days in the facility, I was shocked to see how alive, in every sense, the residents were. In the most literal way possible, Alzheimer’s patients know how to live in the moment. You can see the faint lines of a smile amidst their wrinkly faces appear when we sing songs they remember such as “Daisy Daisy” or watch old movies like “It Happened One Night”. In simple activities such as playing bingo, ball games, or painting their nails, I saw the full embracement of the moment upon their faces. There were so many experiences here that opened my eyes and filled me with the fullness of compassion. There was an immigrant who could only speak Russian, trying to make sense of what memories she might have had left, and had to face the pain of not having anyone around her to communicate any frustrations on top of that. No one could understand if her cries meant that she was in pain or just needed to use the restroom. Yet, by just holding her hand I was able to sense an immense relief.

Although it did not seem like it originally, as I got to know the residents I realized each one of them had entire lives behind them, husbands, children, grandchildren, etc. They had jobs as senators, farmers, dancers, or bankers, to which they devoted their entire lives to. They talked of pains and joys from times I will never know. I talked to a resident who was once the owner of a

large farm in our small town. I watched a smile creep up her face as she reminisced about her farm duties as a young child. I watched a former baseball player throw his hands up in excitement when we played indoor softball. Even as the threads of their life were unraveling, Alzheimer's residents filled me with inspiration.

Alzheimer's individuals taught me how to communicate. In interacting with the residents, adaptability is key. Some residents may address you as someone else from a different time in their lives. This can result in what seems like fragmented sentences, in which they speak of topics to which you have no context for. Other times, they may know what they want to say, but may have forgotten the word that associates with the meaning they are trying to convey. Beyond all the semantics we were taught in our orientation, I learned that they just need to be assured that people care, are listening, and can give them the attention they deserve. They need the reassurance of compassion. After a while, you learn to switch from topic to topic with ease and learn to adapt to whatever they may talk about even if it makes no sense to you. I found myself able to communicate with a much greater ease after a while, and took this skill with me, to outside just the center. I could talk to strangers without my previous awkwardness and unease. I could make great small talk, now able to naturally and confidently make conversation.

After a few months of spending time with the residents, I began to notice a change in myself. Everything I would do would be done with my entire mind, not preoccupied with anything else. I had learned to live in the moment, to completely appreciate anything that I had in front of me. I began to diminish the background static in my head that continually buzzed with the "you forgot to do this", or "I have that test tomorrow..." Instead, I began to give everyone and everything my fullest attention. I realized that life must be lived with steady resilience. Because even when you're old and can't remember your own name, every day can still be a new day.

In college, I want to continue to embroider myself into the Alzheimer's community. I would like to join an Alzheimer's Association, and continue to interact with residents, learning, loving, and forming relationships with them. I would also like to get involved with the rapidly emerging novelties in Alzheimer's Research, perhaps connecting my interest in computational biology, to model neurodegenerative disease in order to accelerate the possibility of treatment. In a broader sense, I am looking forward to understanding and untangling the various complexities that make up modern medicine. Through a lifetime of service, I want to hold on to that simple human touch, the touch that heals and comforts, and be at the heart of humanity.

One Sunday, I walked into the building, scanning the room for my favorite resident. A CNA informed, that the day before, Helen had passed away. I remember the starkness of the moment, how empty her room felt, and how empty the abruptness of the moment had made me feel. After a few weeks of coping with her death, it struck within me that even though Helen was gone, the joy she had almost tangibly spread to her center and what she and the other individuals had taught me were still alive and shimmering in me. Every now and then, I can hear her, in her oh-so distinct New York accent ask "Am I in the right place?" I'll smile and shake my head and continue on with my day. Yes, Helen. You're in the right place.