

On Friday evenings, the sizzle of fresh dumplings on a hot pan filled my home. I would stumble into the kitchen to find my grandfather squatting over a large silver bowl, mixing chopped green onions, garlic, cabbage, pork, and a delectable mix of various spices to create a savory dumpling filling. Afterward, he would fashion his dumplings with ease, placing a blob of filling in the dough wrapper and deftly pinching together the edges with his thumb and index finger to form a sealed crescent shape. That was how the delectable Chinese dish, jiǎozi (dumplings), was born every weekend at my home.

My grandfather's dumplings graced our tables year-round while he lived with us in America. The pan-fried dumplings were a perfect golden brown every time, the crispy exterior complimenting the juicy filling as we dipped them in soy sauce and chili oil. For a while, it seemed as though the mouth-watering smell of fried potstickers and soy sauce would never leave our home. However, even the cherished recipe was defenseless against the ravages of Alzheimer's that inflicted my grandfather's mind.

Slowly, dementia ate away at my grandfather until his memories faded away – his mind becoming a blank slate. Our typical Friday dinners with handmade dumplings were replaced with the artificial taste of frozen dumplings from our local grocery store, which only emphasized the stark absence of our family tradition. My grandfather, once the reigning family champion of Mahjong – a Chinese tile game of strategy and luck – no longer had any interest in playing. The empty clack, clack, clack of the tiles rang on without him. He lost interest in a lot of other things as well: my grandfather no longer painted graceful strokes of calligraphy on weekends and stopped playing traditional Chinese folk songs on his flute. Sometimes, I would ask him and ask in Mandarin, “Yéyé, what's my name?” But he would sit in silence and stare back at me, a clueless expression washing over his face. Within less than a year of diagnosis, he became a stranger in our own home.

One day, my mom brought home fresh cabbages, pork, and green onions. She chopped the green onions and cabbage finely, then poured them into the old silver bowl with the ground pork, garlic, and spices. The familiar savory smell filled the air, and I watched in astonishment as my grandfather stood up slowly from his chair in the living room. As if he were summoned to the silver bowl, he made his way to the kitchen and began to mix the dumpling filling with his bony hands. Then, he maneuvered the thin dough wrapper around the filling, creating a creased border that resembled his signature crescent shape. While his hands no longer moved with the same dexterity and precision as they once did, his lips curled into a small smile as he closed his eyes, his fingertips sealing together dumpling after dumpling. For the first time in years, the sizzle of fresh dumplings frying in a pan and dough circles on the countertop returned to the house.

Our family gathered around the dinner table that night to feast on the dumplings. They weren't perfect: some dumplings were misshapen and the ratio of wrapper to filling was slightly off. But the dumplings had never tasted better. My grandfather picked up one plump dumpling with his chopsticks and waved it in front of my mouth, saying in slow Mandarin, "Here, Xiǎo Duǒ, try this dumpling, my love."

Hearing my grandfather say those words as he offered a dumpling to me was a moment of clarity. I realized that Alzheimer's disease does not erase a lifetime of love – it only amplifies it through small, ephemeral moments. I learned to live in the moment and to cherish the present; every moment that I could spend with my grandfather was another memory I could tuck away into the vast expanse of my own mind. I've come to accept that my relationship with my grandfather is forever different, and will continue to evolve as time passes. Sometimes, loving my grandfather is painful, because I wonder if he's still there, if he still remembers his granddaughter, and if he knows that we're here. But, I choose to lean into my love through small actions. And that night, as I held my grandfather's hand, the smell of crispy, pan-fried potstickers lingered in the air, and moments of Friday evening dinner were forever ingrained in my memory.

Months later, my grandfather returned to his homeland of China, where he could be surrounded by his native language and the care of our extended family. When I call him every week, his disheveled hair and expressionless face tell me of the aggressive development of dementia and what time he has left. Over the video call, however, my aunt chats excitedly about new progressions in Alzheimer's research and clinical trials in China.

Truly, Alzheimer's research has the potential to change the lives of hundreds of thousands of people across the world. As an intern for the Rush Alzheimer's Disease Center this past summer, I completed my own research project about the impact of social isolation on cognitive performance across various racial groups. I worked with elderly study patients from various neighborhoods in Chicago, using Mini-Mental State Exams to assess their cognitive impairment. As I guided patients through a variety of odd tasks, such as "repeat this phrase after me" or "count backward by seven," I understood that behind the devastating disease of Alzheimer's, each patient had a unique sense of humor and a vibrant personality. Many patients would joke around, their eyes twinkling with laughter. After analyzing the results from my research, I found that as social isolation increased, cognitive performance decreased, with this association prevalent across all racial groups.

To combat the issue of social isolation amongst the elderly at-risk population for dementia, especially during times of COVID, I initiated a pen pal program, where volunteers are matched with seniors at nursing homes in underserved Chicagoan communities. Each volunteer would call on a biweekly schedule, discussing hobbies, current events, and the chaotic state of the world

with a senior residing at the nursing home. I've realized that my generation (Generation Z, as some may call it) often seems to be disconnected from the older generation, or unaware of the challenges that families face when a loved one is diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. By connecting the younger generation with the older generation, I hope to bridge some of the generational gaps that exist in our society and foster a culture of care for one another, especially during the isolating times of the pandemic. While the shortage of technology at some locations has further exacerbated many of the disparities in cognitive health across the aging population, the mission of the pen pal program is to mitigate senior isolation in nursing homes that may not have access to video calling services or computers.

The various stories I've heard from my grandfather and the various elderly study participants I've worked with have inspired me to pursue a degree in neuroscience in college. One of my goals is to study both the social and biological determinants of Alzheimer's disease and other neurodegenerative diseases across racial groups to better understand existing disparities in health. I am excited by the possibility of paving the way forward for future interventions and treatments for Alzheimer's disease. Another one of my goals is to establish better care procedures and more comprehensive resources for minority and immigrant families, like my own. By doing so, I hope to break down the widespread stigma surrounding dementia across various cultures and educate more people about Alzheimer's. This will allow us all to unite and support individuals who may be affected by the disease.

As I venture into college, I also plan on continuing my pen pal program with the local community, sharing letters and phone calls of love across generations. And who knows? Perhaps when it's safe to visit senior homes in-person, I'll share a few of my grandfather's delectable dumplings as well!