

I made sure to go extra slow as I walked past room 10. As I peeked inside, I saw that hospice had removed her bed. I saw that her family had removed her clothes, including the bright-blue sweater that I personally thought made her look stunning, even in her darkest times. I listen, and instead of hearing her sarcastic laugh as she talked about cowboys, I hear nothing. Losing Molly was one of the hardest deaths I have experienced yet. Although I didn't know Molly until she was a higher level Alzheimer's patient, I could tell by her caring eyes and bright smile that she was a magnificent woman and a gift to every person that had the opportunity to be with her. Just like all of my residents, Molly was special to my heart, and I miss her very much.

When I was 16 years old, I decided to apply for a job as a dietary aide at an Alzheimer's Special Care Center. As I began to work and get to know the residents, I decided that I wanted to give more to the community than just a few meals. So the day I turned 17 I enrolled in a class to receive my certification to be a nursing aide. I completed my clinical in an intensive dementia care unit, where I was exposed to the true tragedy of the disease.

I met residents who couldn't sleep at night because they didn't know where their parents were, and why they were left at "this place". I met others who would pace back and forth through the locked down hallway as if they had some purpose, or a meeting they had to attend. I met a few that wouldn't even talk to me at first, lying in bed all day pretending either I didn't exist, or they didn't exist. Some patients would not get up in the morning, refusing care, and stay there all day and all night until they decided that taking a few steps out of bed was worth it. Overall, the unit was small, sad, and quiet. When I finished my clinical, I realized that being a caregiver was going to take a lot more than just giving basic physical needs to the patients. I would be capable of making a difference in the remaining time of someone's life. As I finished

my class and moved on to the care center, I took a personal interest in my residents, and I also became very familiar with the disease itself.

Alzheimer's encroaches on one's most precious memories, such as the name of your grandchild, or the knowledge that one's husband has passed away. Then, it steals one's personality, as a state of confusion grasps and molds it into something of bitterness and sadness. Many of my residents experience depression and anger, justifiably so. Not only is the person robbed of their memory but the ability to do everyday tasks and basic functions is lost as well. This is perhaps the most tolling on the resident. Yes, I'm talking about the lady who is always cold, but can't figure out how to put her arms through the sleeves of her warmest sweater. Or the patient who tries to speak and communicate with you, but words are seldom formed and nothing comes from her mouth but incomprehensible parts of speech. The worst part about that is that she doesn't even realize that I can't understand her, so it's unimaginable to understand how she feels when no one answers her questions. Another example might be about a movement we take for granted, such as walking. Many higher level patients may forget that they are incapable of walking, and they fall, often causing serious or even fatal injuries. I have discovered in my journey working with people with this disease that Alzheimer's strips away everything that is important mentally and physically. It strips people of their independence. It takes away all that one holds close to their heart. No more walks in the park with your husband. No more going out to dinner with your kids to hear about their job and their kids. No more reading your favorite book. No more writing to your best friend who is in another care center. No more of so many things that you used to do.

In the midst of all of this struggle and pain however, I believe that light can shine through the cracks of even the darkest room. This is where my job rises in importance. Yes, I do believe

that Alzheimer's disease is very tragic, but what many do not understand is that even in a place filled with disease, depression and confusion; I have never felt a larger presence of life, hope, and love.

When I talk about life, hope and love, I'm talking about the kind of life I see as a resident laughs and sings along to an old Frank Sinatra Christmas tune. Or the type of hope I see them experience as their grandchild reaches for their fragile, worn hands during a visit. And finally, I'm talking about the love that is shared between a resident and caregiver when I hug and comfort a woman who just remembered that her husband passed away years ago. As I attended the funeral of one of my patients, I learned that he was a decorated soldier, and a loving husband and grandfather to many beautiful children. I also learned that he loved cars and barbecuing. Although I hadn't known anything about his background before, I knew that he was a kind, wonderful man, with Alzheimer's disease and without. Alzheimer's Disease can strip away as much of a person as it wants, but it can never strip away the human instinct to laugh, smile, comfort, cry, and most importantly, to love. So as I sneak an extra cookie to the "grumpy old man" who sits and sleeps for most of the day, as I blast loud music while dancing and giggling with the lady who refuses to get out of bed half the time, and as I say "goodnight, I love you!" to the mournful woman who always wants to see her parents again, I, as their caregiver, begin to feel like part of their loving circle of family.

In my job, I spend a great deal of time with the residents. I am the friend that tells them that they are important, and that so many people care about them. I am the friend that makes sure that they feel safe and loved. And some of the time, I am the friend that says "Goodnight, I love you very much", as I sit with them through their last night and their final breath.

Alzheimer's disease is complex and full of loose ends that are currently trying to be tied together by doctors and scientists. A cure is hopefully in our future. However, finding a cure is not the only thing that is important with this disease. As a primary caregiver for so many people with Alzheimer's disease, I feel like it is crucial that I share what I personally think is something just as important: just because patients with this disease forget, does not mean they can ever be forgotten. With this disease or not, these people are still full of life! They have so much to give to us, and I have seen miracles happen. I have seen people recover from hospice when no one thought they would. I have seen a lady who hasn't spoken in years say full sentences. And I have seen people who are on their death-bed smile and laugh one more time with their families or with us caregivers. Those special moments I have shared with my residents are some of the most special I have spent with anyone. As Karl Menninger once said, "Love cures people—both the ones who give it and the ones who receive it." As I go on to college to pursue my pre-med degree in Neuroscience, I do it in memory of the ones I have lost, and in acknowledgment of those in the care center who have changed my life forever.

*All names and room numbers have been adjusted to protect the privacy of the residents.

*Quote credible to:

Menninger, Karl. *Quotes of Love*. The Quote Garden. Web. 15 February 2016.