

Nearly five years ago I was introduced to a completely new way of living my daily life. Before my freshman year of high school began, my grandmother, then a newly diagnosed victim of Alzheimer, moved into my house to live the remainder of her life and disease with my family and me. It was the beginning of a new experience for my family, and one that we are still learning and growing from today.

My grandmother, Joyce Bowden, has always been a dominant aspect of my life. When I was younger, she lived less than five minutes from my house. I remember my sisters and I spending almost every weekend with her. We baked cookies, played games like Dominoes and Skip-O, and performed concerts for her on her keyboard and karaoke machine. My grandma's house was where I learned to ride a bike and buried my first dog. Throughout my childhood, she grew to become my closest friend.

Even before her she was diagnosed, my grandmother played an enormous role in shaping me to be the person I am today. As I grew older, she became my confidant and source of wisdom when I was going through a rough time. She was always there for me when I needed her and was the person I trusted most. This bond that we shared, however, made the change even more drastic the day my parents brought my grandmother's belongings to our house and moved her into my sister's old bedroom.

The first year of my grandmother living with us was very hard for me. I went through a phase of denial where I did not want to accept the idea that I was going to have to watch the day-by-day progression of my grandma losing her mobility and memory to this disease. Instead of taking advantage of being with her every day while she was still herself, I chose to turn my anger at the disease on her and ignored her completely. I refused to take any part in helping my parents take care of her and rarely spoke to her. It was not until the

following year, when her condition had worsened to the point that she could no longer recall who I was, that I realized my error. I had made the mistake of not being there for her as she had been for me every day of my life. To this day, I still consider how I handled the situation at the beginning to be one of the greatest regrets of my life.

Although I regret what I have done, I am also aware of the fact that the process of accepting her illness and admitting my mistakes allowed me to develop as a person. Once I came to terms with my wrongdoings of that first year, I completely changed my perspective and behavior towards her disease. I took responsibility for my actions and used the experience as a way to learn how to handle difficult situations in a more mature manner. I also developed a greater appreciation for the time I have been allotted with my grandma, and strive to take advantage of every moment I now have with her. In the years following my initial reaction, I have dedicated myself to participate as much as possible in my family's efforts to make her as healthy, happy and comfortable as possible while she suffers from this awful disease.

Becoming an active role in taking care of my grandma has influenced my life greatly. I have witnessed my grandma gradually forget how to do basic everyday tasks that we often take for granted like walking, driving, eating, bathing, and even using the restroom. My family and I have had to learn how to do all of these tasks for her, not only because without us she would be unable to function, but also because if the roles were reversed, she would do the same for us. My grandmother, a once independent and strong-willed woman, now depends on me to do things for her like feed and dress her. Her dependency on me has forced me to grow above the maturity level of what is typically expected of someone my

age. Because of Alzheimer's disease, I have had to learn the responsibilities of taking care of someone else before I have even had the chance to begin taking care of myself.

It has been five years since my grandmother has moved in with us and by now she has lost nearly all recollection of who I am. She can no longer look at me and put a name to my face. Every day when I get home from work or school she asks me "Where am I?" or "Who are you?" I look forward to the rare, brief moments where she is almost certain I am even related to her. It has truly been a heartbreaking process to see my best friend change into someone who views me as a stranger. Despite all of this, I know her unconditional love for me is still there, even if she cannot always express it. This phase of my life has helped me learn to be grateful and appreciate what I have and might have otherwise taken for granted.

One incident in particular has had a great impact on my life. It was a beautiful day one afternoon and my family and neighbors decided to enjoy the weather by having lunch together outside. I was alone in the house with my grandma, preparing her meal before taking her outside to join the rest of our family. As she sat in her wheelchair waiting for me to finish her sandwich, she began to get agitated that she was not outside with everyone else. Although I was speaking to her the entire time attempting to console her, I failed to see that she had begun to try and lift herself out of her wheelchair. In a split second she went crashing to the ground and I heard the crack of her head on our floor. I saw my grandma's split open head and my world went into slow motion as I called for help. Everyone rushed in and I will never forget how they handled the situation. The different families who lived on my street found their own way to aid in the situation. Some left to grab as many medical supplies as they could from their house, while others offered

transportation to the nearest hospital. One woman in particular held on to my dazed grandmother's hand and began conversing with her to keep her from panicking. I have never felt closer or more touched by my community than when coping with them through this horrific incident.

The financial strain of this process has also caused me to realize the diligence of my family. Due to the increasing amount of attention required by my grandmother's worsening condition, my mom had to quit her job in order to stay home to ensure my grandmother's well being. This has caused my family of six to now live on the single Houston Fire Fighter's income from my father. He now takes on as many overtime opportunities as he possibly can and works hard to keep our family functioning. My other sisters and I have had to also pick up jobs while in school and learn how to manage our money more responsibly in order to help support our family. My extended family has also contributed greatly by providing food, financial support, and their time so that my family and I can continue participating in activities like high school softball, choir, National Honor Society, Key Club, and FFA. I have developed a strong sense of pride in my family and their willingness to help with my grandma affected by Alzheimer's disease.

Despite the sorrows my family and I have endured from taking care of my grandma, I would not deny taking on the job again if given the choice. Love is often about give and take. Just as my grandma once continuously provided me with love and support during my struggles, I now strive to return the same love and support to her throughout this phase of her life. By being given the honor to care for her, she has continued to have a profound influence on my life and the development of my character. I have learned the responsibilities of having someone depend on me and have realized how to be grateful for

the little things in life. Although the illness has caused many struggles, Alzheimer's disease has also allowed me to grow closer to my family and community. I do not regret my family taking on the task of caring for my grandma, and instead I have allowed myself to relish and grow in the experience that I am still living through today.