

Age 10 - Daddy diagnosed with Dementia

Age 11 - Daddy's Dementia had progressed to Alzheimer's disease. He no longer knew who I was.

Age 14 - Daddy passed away.

When he was first diagnosed, I had difficulty understanding what was actually happening. The only explanation Mom could give was, "he will slowly start to forget everything." I was completely lost. How does a 10 year old comprehend that every single memory she shares with her father, the most important man in her life, will no longer be remembered? His memory of her and the sweetness of their time would literally be gone-to exist no more. I didn't believe her-my Mom. She said it, but I didn't believe it was even possible that memory could be completely erased. Then, small things began to happen. Misplacing the car keys, asking the same questions over and over again, and laughing but forgetting the joke were the start. Then it progressed. One day, while in the family room, we were playing pool and he said, "Be right back. I have to use the bathroom." Daddy reached the top of the stairs, turned, looked at me, and said, "Wait... what was I about to do again?" It was then, in that moment, that I knew it was true. Mom was right. Memory could be erased just like the sand pixels when shaking an Etch-A-Sketch.

It all happened so fast. Overnight. It seems that I woke up one day, and he was no longer able to feed himself, walk or talk. What was once a robust 6'2, 180 pound tennis guru had become a small individual, confined to a wheelchair, absent of life. The look in his eyes was as blank as a sheet of paper. Mentally- he was absent. I quickly understood that he had no idea who I was, but I often wondered if he had any recollection of my identity. I felt quite helpless. There was

nothing I could do, nothing I could say, no prayer that I could pray to make it go away. Yet, I was expected to be “okay” with what was happening with him and “understand.”

But I couldn't. I was 13 years old.

I was entering high school. I had just joined the basketball team. All the while, Daddy was dying. I wanted to share with my friends, but I couldn't. It was too much for me to process. I had my own questions, and I did not have the desire to answer their questions. I knew they would be supportive, but I just could not bring myself to answer questions that I, myself, didn't have answers to. Was it hereditary? How do you accept having a disease that is incurable? What was his first thought when being diagnosed? When he was informed of his diagnosis, did he ever look at me and get sad because he knew that one day he would not be able to share in life with me? There were, and still remain, so many unanswered questions.

Once I came to terms with Daddy's condition, it seemed that there was no looking up. We had to take it all as it came. We had good times reminiscing and looking at old photos, but it wasn't the same. The last memory of him is permeated in my mind; confined to a wheelchair, unable to speak or even mumble, barely blinking. I walked up to him and looked him in the face. He looked at me, and for a split second, he knew me. He recognized who I was. His eyes lit up almost as if he wanted to confirm that everything would be ok, but as fast as the light came, it dissipated. Just when I began to get excited, he had returned to the “black hole.” Gone. When I remember him as an invalid, it's memories such as this that make it a tiny bit easier to process.

I don't recall the day Daddy died. I did not attend the funeral service. I don't quite know why, but I suppose it was for the best. My father died a slow, painful, unwarranted death. Part of me was relieved when he finally transitioned, because although it all happened within a short amount of

time, the end of his life was no indication of who he was, what he believed, or how he played the Oscar winning part of "Daddy." He was only 52 years old.

Alzheimer's is a very real disease. It is often overlooked and seen as an "old person's disease." It is often misconstrued and misinterpreted. The disease affects everyone in ways that are unimaginable, and as a child, my father confined to a wheelchair absent of life, is not the picture most favored. The little girl that I was did not have a professional to help me process this "new normal." My family and I discovered that there were many support groups for spouses and for their adult children, but there were not many resources for adolescents whose parents struggle with this disease. It is because of this absence in my community that I desire to start a nonprofit organization for adolescent children whose parents are suffering from Dementia/Alzheimer's. I want my organization to provide mentorship, counseling, and create a safe, fun and loving environment for children who are journeying the road of my reality. I desire that my organization is considered a "vacation from their reality."

My father's rapid decline and eventual death motivates me in ways that I rarely discuss. The innocence that I once had was lost by no fault of my own. The average issues of a 12 year old such as who said what about whom, boy crushes, going to the local hangout after school and sharing Hot Cheetos and Slushies with friends, stewing over potential dates for the Homecoming dance, and searching for the best dress for the Winter Formal were not a priority of mine. Yet, while my innocence was shattered, Daddy's death taught me that my youth remained. I had to live life differently. I had to learn how to have fun in spite of my pain. I had to move forward, progress, and make the best lemonade out of this crappy bag of lemons. In the name and memory of my father, I found a new sense of strength, wisdom, and faith.

I woke up one morning, and as I passed his picture on the nightstand, I realized that the drama between friends at school, the mistakes made during basketball practice, the latest videos on SnapChat or the worst photos uploaded to Facebook were not “end of the world” moments. Each moment was one to be enjoyed, lessons were to be learned, wisdom was to be shared, and love was to be expressed. My father seized each day, and I learned that I owed it to him, to me, and to all those whose lives I would impact in my future to seize each day and savor every moment. Daddy last days taught me that time is borrowed and will expire without notice or consequence.

The passing of my father has not only strengthened me, but it has strengthened my entire family. My mother, two sisters, and I depend on each other in a way that we never have before. We communicate, share perspectives, and love on one another a lot more than we ever have. We share values of truth that are real, we understand the true measure of time, and we interact with one another in a way that if Daddy were still here, we might easily take for granted. We engage in greater acts of community service - together - because my father’s sickness taught us that everyone - regardless of race, socio-economic status, or privilege - is battling and fighting their way through life in some form or fashion. We have a much stronger desire to serve others, and we choose to serve together.

I want to accomplish as much as I can with the time that I am given on Earth. I work hard to excel academically as well as in any acts of service and my extracurricular activities. I work hard to create positive memories for myself and others. My desire to attend college, achieve success, and serve youth by way of my future foundation. These aspirations are my mission. Why? Because I realize, perhaps more than others, that life is short - and sometimes, memories are even shorter. Thanks Daddy!