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Caregivers discuss heartbreak of Alzheimer's

By Mardi Suhs

Alzheimer's disease, a dementia that causes problems with memory, thinking and behavior, is the sixth leading cause of death in the United States.

"Alzheimer's is fatal and is the only cause of death in the top ten that has no cure, no treatment and no way to slow its progression."

To honor the endurance of those facing Alzheimer's and the dedication of the 505,000 dedicated caregivers in our state, Gov. Rick Snyder has declared that June is Alzheimer's and Brain Awareness Month.

"As Michigan's population continues to age, Alzheimer's will have an even greater impact on our state," stated Snyder. "That is why we are . . . helping bring increased awareness and support for our fellow Michiganders who are struggling with this disease."

Here are the stories as seen through the eyes of the area's most experienced and trained



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received specialized training in dementia.

"I didn't want to see the signs," she admitted. "I probably ignored the signs."

Denial is common. At first, forgetfulness seems normal as parents age.

"Dad had mini-strokes or stroke-induced dementia, and he never had any physical limitations," explained Wilson. Her father was the go-to guy in his neighborhood near Port Huron. He helped people out, he mowed their lawns. Neighbors "covered" for him when he was a little forgetful.

"It affected his memory and that is what's hard... because you can't see it, you don't want to believe it," she said.

Soon her brother was calling to have Wilson coax her father to eat or take his medications.

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And then there was an "incident" that revealed the seriousness of his illness.

On Thanksgiving day of 2012, her father's house was filled with family and friends enjoying turkey dinner and football games. Yet 77-year-old Dale Frappier started roaming from room to room and wouldn't eat.

Wilson realized the activity was confusing for him. A few days later he had a "combative" incident and the family knew it was time to get help. He now lives in the memory care wing of the Curry House Assisted Living and Memory Care in Cadillac.

Wilson is the Curry House memory care coordinator and a certified dementia practitioner. She works with families to help them understand the illness. Advanced training plus her own experience allows her to be sympathetic and understanding while providing valuable information.

Her job is to oversee a staff of 20 as they care for 24 residents, keeping them medically healthy and physically comfortable. She also provides ongoing education for staff on how to deal with Alzheimer's behaviors.

"There are times of agitation, anger and hostility," she explained. "Instead of sedating them, I want to help them stay as highly functional as possible." Her goal is to keep family members involved during visits and to keep Alzheimer's patients engaged by providing safe, supervised activities.

But when an Alzheimer's patient doesn't recognize family or remember their visits, loved ones sometimes retreat, unable to deal with the progression of the disease.

Donna Britton drives to Cadillac three times a week from Fife Lake to spend the day with her 82-year-old mother, Mildred Prince, who's been at the Curry House for two years.

"You go through all these emotions. I think I'm finally over it — but a month ago I had a really bad time. She wouldn't wake up. She didn't know who I was. It was harder than anything I've been through."

Wilson noted that having an Alzheimer's diagnosis is "overwhelming" and emotional, mainly because "it's never going to get better. It doesn't matter what kind of dementia, the end result is death."

Caregivers must have a "heart" for the work, she said. They must feel an empathy and calling to help the elderly when they are at their most vulnerable.

"My goal is to make sure our residents have the dignity and respect they deserve," Wilson said. "I want to make their final journey as easy on them as I can. I want to be there for the families."

Wilson's co-worker Mollie Osborn is the sales and marketing director. But her name tag should read; psychologist, hand-holder, hugger and friend. She views her work a privilege "to help families with the transition from home into residential care."

Pam Liebler is the resident care coordinator at Green Acres Retirement Living Community, where 85 percent of the 32 residents have dementia related illnesses. She's also a certified dementia practitioner and a licensed practical nurse.

"I strive to see what we can do for them, the success we can have in making their life meaningful until God takes them home," she shared.

Liebler holds a monthly Alzheimer's Association support group at Green Acres, where people share stories of what they are going through.

"Everyone gets a chance to talk about how the last month went. There are tremendous sadness issues," she said. "This is for them to vent and get information from people going through the same traumatic experience."

Liebler pores over the latest Alzheimer's research and is discouraged.

A major study once claimed that one in 13 people will acquire a dementia syndrome. Now studies suggest that one out of every seven people is at risk. The recent conclusions for women are worse, one in three.

"For all the research being done we still don't have our fingers on an exact cause for Alzheimer's," she admitted. "Right now there is no breakthroughs for a cure. With this disease you have to make sure that every day is special, because within 24 hours another part of cognition could be gone...towards our end stages — then it's just waiting ...for God to give them a better plan than what we have here on earth."

What it is important to you:

June is Alzheimer's Awareness Month. The goal is to raise awareness and funds to fight the dementia disease that is fatal, has no cure, no treatment and no way to slow its progression.

What you need to know:

More than 170,000 people over the age of 65 have Alzheimer's in Michigan. This fatal disease kills nerve cells and tissue in the brain, affecting a person's ability to remember, think and plan. As the disease progresses, the brain shrinks due to cell death and individuals lose the ability to communicate and care for themselves.

Where to get help for dealing with Alzheimer's:

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Join the conversation

An Alzheimer's Association Support Group meets at Green Acres Assisted Living in Cadillac at 2 p.m. on the first Wednesday of each month. The group is overseen by Pam Liebler, a certified dementia practitioner. For information, call 231-775-5300.

Help for Alzheimer's Caregivers:

A free training program for those caring for someone with dementia and memory loss is offered by the Area Agency on Aging of Northwest Michigan. Call 1-800-442-1713 for information. The program teaches how to:

- Reduce caregiver stress
- Improve caregiver self confidence
- Plan activities for loved ones based on their strengths

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