



# The Tangled Web that Alzheimer's Disease Weaves

by Cheri Pearson

It can rob any one of us. Without rhyme or reason it could choose your mother, father, spouse or friend and steal their memories, personality and dignity, leaving a hollow, empty shell of the person you once knew. The dreaded thief is Alzheimer's Disease.

Last year, more than 5,000 scientists from all over the world met at the International Conference on Alzheimer's and Related Disorders in yet another effort to search for answers and a cure, but there was none. No miraculous breakthroughs for those fighting to be saved.

More than five million people have Alzheimer's. After age 65, the possibility of being diagnosed with the disease is 1 in 10. After 85, it is 1 in 2. In a twist of fate, medical science may be able to prolong our bodies but not our minds. The real dilemma is over the horizon. Last year, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that by 2030 there would be 57.8 million baby boomers between the ages of 66-84. In that case, we could look at doubling the population of people who are effectively "losing their minds" to 10 million.

Ironically, President Bush became a baby boomer recently and yet he proposed a 2006 budget representing the largest cuts in federal spending for Alzheimer's Research. Funding flat lined, since Congress adjourned without agreeing on a final budget. The Alzheimer's Association estimates that \$148 billion is spent annually on direct and indirect costs and if the numbers hold true we will be doubling that expense in 2030. These numbers are facts, not scare tactics.

Numbers aside, anguish is what prevails as this epidemic tears at families. Eleanor Zind, married for 60 years, witnessed the slow death sentence torment her husband, Frederic Zind, for 20 years. Frederic was a talented chemical engineer who ate a Mediterranean diet, played chess, read political magazines and enjoyed adventure.

They had two boys and two girls. "Every summer it was like in those funny movies, with stuffed piled high on top of the car and flying off...that was us," Eleanor laughs while describing family trips. The diagnosis hit him hard and he was acutely aware of losing abilities. "He was devastated he could not vote because he could not read the ballot," she says sadly. His attention span and understanding shortened and it became difficult to take him places. Eleanor, knowing he would become disruptive, informed him that they could not attend the opera with friends. That night was intensely emotional as reality hit him, "there is something wrong in my head...I want to fix it," he cried.

Her children picked up on how far he had deteriorated and had a serious conversation with her about placing him in a home. Eleanor had been running on empty and they feared for her long-term health. She wept the night she left him in foster care for a trial basis. When she went to visit him, he did not even realize he was in a different home. He was delighted with the new family and thought they were his. When his daughter would visit there would be a flicker of recognition as she held his hand and looked in his eyes, "I'm your daughter. You gave me my name," she would tell him earnestly. This past visit, even that small satisfaction was denied.

"I miss him terribly," Eleanor says quietly. "It is sad to see someone bright and articulate, out of it. You look at them

and they don't look lovable, but then you remember how he was and how painful the process is. My love for him is more tangible to me."

Denise Watkins, is the executive director of the Alzheimer's Association STAR Chapter headquartered in El Paso, initially walked in the door of the Alzheimer's Association in need of direction after her mother was diagnosed. "We felt desperate. We knew something was happening and did not know how to deal with the behaviors. We wanted to find out more about it and how to help my mother. The volunteer spoke of her experience and helped us with what was happening," she says. Eventually, Watkins became a volunteer and was offered a permanent position in 1997. "The Alzheimer's Association provides education, awareness and tips on how to deal with the disease. There is a 24-hour hotline that can be called seven days a week," she informs.

Fate would have it that the disease stole from their family twice, this time taking Watkins' mother-in-law. "My mother and mother-in-law were best friends when I was a child and lived in Ruidoso. It was hard for me to see my mother not know me, but it was harder for me to watch my husband have his mother look through him and not know who he was. You lose the person long before they die," she says sorrowfully.

Her daughter, Brandi Brown, can attest to the difficulties associated with this "scary disease." "With any mom, dad or spouse that has Alzheimer's, there is guilt in taking a stand to keep them safe. They don't understand what's happening," she says. Many patients will try and hide their deteriorating faculties in fear that their independence will be stripped of them. When vehicles, possessions and homes are taken away, there is understandable confusion and terror. Yet, the caregiver recognizes that these steps, albeit difficult, are almost always necessary. Driving becomes dangerous as patients become confused and forgetful. Homes become unsafe when patients can't remember if they fed themselves, eventually forget how to eat or become overwhelmed over a simple task like bathing.

In order to raise funds for Alzheimer's and awareness and to give back to the association, Brandi Brown designed and created a beautiful Swavorski crystal bracelet that has been approved by the National Association.

Texas State Representative Joe Pickett was struck by the story of El Pasoan Cruz Fierro, who passed away after wandering off. A TV news department asked why there was not a special alert system in place for the elderly like the "amber" alert system for children. Pickett diligently began his research and pre-filed a bill in November of 2006. "The criteria wound up being very specific. To qualify under the 'Silver Alert', a person must be 65 years or older, a Texas resident and under a doctor's care for a form of mental dementia...I have been contacted since the passage of this by several other states that are looking for a model to begin a 'Silver Alert' in their state," says Pickett. He credits the Fierro family as the catalyst for getting others involved.

November is Alzheimer's Awareness Month and there is a desperate urgency for those who are devastated by this unpredictable disease that almost always leaves nothing behind. Activists, researchers, associations and legislators are pushing for answers, solutions and support before this epidemic plunders and deprives another family of the wisdom and beauty of elders. 