Aging Lifestyles: Alzheimer's patients proved unforgettable

by Joe_Volz

They were a unique group of men.

One was a distinguished lawyer who had represented a Watergate figure. Another was a prominent psychiatrist. They all had one thing in common when they met every Friday a decade ago at a Washington church. They were suffering from the early stages of Alzheimer's disease.

I thought of them the other day with the announcement of the latest number of Alzheimer's patients. There are now 5 million of them, up a million from the last count. It is not that we have become more vulnerable but just that as we live longer. In this age of medical miracles, we are more likely to get the disease.

When I volunteered to work with the men, all gone now, friends said I was being foolish. I was taking on an impossible mission. After all, no one is cured. Each week would just be watching these men being slowly robbed of their minds until they could not remember who they were. Well, I volunteered anyhow. It was the most rewarding year of my life. The men had once been proud achievers who had accomplished great things, both in war and peace. They had faced death in the skies over Europe and on the beaches of the South Pacific in World War II. They had come home to reach the pinnacle of their professions and now they were losing everything - their sanity, their health and their lives. Yet, they were going through this difficult time with such good grace, humor and humility. In the beginning, they knew what was happening to them. I thought that they would have displayed anger. Rage at the unfairness of it all. But instead they laughed and told stories of the war years, even if they did get the time sequence mixed up a bit. And they enjoyed playing darts. The innocence of childhood was returning.

Although their recent memories faded first, they kept the past in order for a long time. They remembered the words of old songs and singing was a regular part of our time together. My role was also to help them remember the stories of their youth. I was not much younger than they were. I had a shared history with them. The pleasant young social worker, who ran our group, was so much younger, she had no idea what they were talking about. We walked around the neighborhood and we took field trips, too, to the Navy Museum and the local art gallery. It was, despite it all, a joyous time.

But it seemed like almost every week, there was yet another missing chair at the church. Another member had descended so far into the fog that he had become institutionalized. The others hardly seemed to miss him. They were fighting their own demons. By the end of the year, there was no one left in the group and it disbanded.

If you were to ask me now, though, if that year had been wasted, if the despair had overwhelmed the joy for me, I would respond emphatically, "No." Those men taught me how to live, and die, in a way that I would have learned nowhere else.

So, if you have a chance to help or to start a group, do it.

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