

Alzheimer's Disease

Dick Johnson and Eleanor Solien

Because new drugs take years to produce from concept to market—and because drugs that seem promising in early-stage studies may not work as hoped in large-scale trials—it is critical that Alzheimer's research continue to accelerate.

— Alzheimer's Association

Life is full of teachable moments and perhaps we learn the most valuable lessons in our most tested times. For retired teachers Dick Johnson and Eleanor Solien, their greatest test was not in a classroom. It was life itself.

Dick and Eleanor have passed each other in the hallways of the Henning Public School for the past six years. In the evenings, they greet one another as next-door neighbors, sharing local news tidbits or marveling at the erratic Minnesota weather. Yet, for all they appear to have in common, there is a more deep-seated connection: both have experienced the painful lessons of being caregivers to loved ones suffering from Alzheimer's.

Dick Johnson, now 66, remembers like it was yesterday how he cared for his mother Lucille—and his father—after she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Looking back, he recognizes that the symptoms were there long before doctors confirmed what Dick and his sisters suspected. As a result, Dick moved his parents from their Dilworth home to Henning, where he lives. Unfortunately for Lucille, there were no drugs available to treat her symptoms and nursing home facilities had little care expertise to offer families and their loved ones. Lucille's world grew smaller as she recognized fewer and fewer family members. Dick never quite knew what to expect as her mood swings and paranoia became more and more common. The downward spiral continued until 1995, when at the age of 74 Lucille passed away.

Eleanor Solien has an appreciation of Dick's caregiving experience: In 2003, doctors at the Mayo Clinic diagnosed Eleanor's husband, Ted, with Alzheimer's. "We were sure they could do something for us at Mayo," remembers Eleanor. However, all they could offer was a clinical trial for an experimental therapy that researchers hoped would aid Alzheimer's patients. "We lived too far away from Mayo Clinic to make it possible to participate." In 2005, in order to be closer to their daughters, Eleanor and Ted moved from their retirement home on Lake Lizzie to Henning—next door to Dick. Eleanor managed to take care of Ted at home, but over time it became too much for her to handle. What followed was a revolving door of nursing home experiences, demonstrating the limitations of Alzheimer's care in rural settings.

In April 2010, seven years after being diagnosed with Alzheimer's Ted passed away, leaving behind his wife of nearly 54 years. Eleanor and her three daughters comfort themselves in their abiding faith and belief that "Ted is certainly in a better place."

Today, Eleanor and Dick are more than willing to share the lessons they have learned. Dick advises caregivers to "brace themselves" and pray for patience. Eleanor counsels, "take one day at a time." Both recognize the virtual helplessness of their loved ones' situations, taking comfort that their loved ones' pain at least is over. "You have to accept it, because fighting it really isn't an option," remarks Dick as he laments the need for better diagnostic tests and medications that actually address the disease.

While strides have been made in both directions, for Eleanor's husband the disease took pretty much the same course with no remedy or symptomatic relief. She recalls that Ted was prescribed one medication, but it provided no noticeable change in his regression. She prays that research will lead to breakthroughs in Alzheimer's treatment—more than 100 years after the disease was first identified. For Dick, he lives in fear of his own future. Alzheimer's is not a lesson he wants to learn twice.