

**National Family Caregiver Month**  
*Supporting Loved Ones with Dementia*

**Diane Vanlandingham, Rhinelander, WI**

**Knowing the Signs**

For National Family Caregiver Month, we honor caregivers like Diane, whose whole family knows the signs of dementia. Her grandmother struggled with dementia, but was never formally diagnosed, as years ago many just called it senility. Her aunt also had dementia and lived with it for over 15 years. Due to the family history, her father, Don, was very conscious of dementia. When he started showing signs, he took the initiative to get a diagnosis and it was determined he had vascular dementia. He immediately got he, his wife, Jean, and Diane to participate in a support group at the Alzheimer's Association to help them on their journey.

He was able to stay at home until the very end, with the care of his wife and Diane's assistance. The last 6 months, Diane came to their house every day to help and spend time with her dad (watching Westerns were a favorite past time). The month before he died, Diane's parents moved to an assisted living facility to support them, before he lost his 7-year battle.

Diane's mother returned home for several years before moving back into assisted living. She also was diagnosed with dementia. Diane is the primary family member responsible for her mother's care and her mother is now at Rennes Nursing Facility to better serve her needs.



Diane's parents Jean and Don.

**Caregiver Challenges**

Diane's father was very proactive about his condition and open-minded about how things would change. For example, he knew he would lose his ability to drive and advised Diane to take him to the doctor when she observed it was a problem, and the decision would be made *for* him.

With her father, Diane and her mother were both caring for him and making decisions. Now, with Diane as the primary person making decisions on her mother's behalf, her mother sometimes pushes back. "I want what's best for my mom, and it's hard to be the bad guy," said Diane. "I just remind mom that I am following the wishes she has laid out."

**Loved on in a Facility**

COVID-19 has been hard on all families with a loved one in a facility. "We haven't been able to see mom in person," said Diane. "It's been very devastating for us not to be able to hug her and let her know we're there. The facility has been doing a very good job of making the best of a bad situation. I know she's in the safest place and being well cared for, but it's very hard for families." The facility has regular, open communication with all families and strict COVID-19 protocols in place to protect residents.

Families are most concerned about the isolation for the loved ones in a facility. Diane shares a few suggestions:

- Phone tree – Reach out to friends and family and ask them to call your loved one with regularity
- Card Shower – The mail is so important to those in a facility. She suggests buying cards in bulk and mailing a card a day (or with some regularity)
- Emailing pictures – Send pictures of family and friends to make your loved one feel included in what's going on

## Giving Back

Diane has been involved with the Alzheimer's Association for 17 years, starting when she attended her first support group with her father. Today the student has become the teacher and Diane co-facilitates a virtual Support Group 2x a month.

“I love leading the Support Group,” said Diane. “With any support group, you don't know what to expect. It's a good opportunity to have an outlet and hear what others are going through. I tell people to just try it once – you don't even have to talk, but just listen.”

Diane recalls that even after her father passed, she and her mother still participated in the support group for several years because they felt that they could help other caregivers with their experiences. “I stayed friends with several people from my dad's support group,” Diane shared. “It's not just that period in your life – it can be so much more. Our friendship wasn't just defined by the disease that brought us together, but our friendships is still strong today.”

Support groups are traditionally in-person meetings, but have transitioned to virtual meetings during COVID-19. “People join our group by phone and video,” said Diane. “I'm not generally a 'virtual' person and at first I thought it would be impersonal, but once you get started talking, you forget you're not in the same room.”

Diane also volunteers for the Walk to end Alzheimer's® in Rhinelander. “I try to stay active in any way I can,” shared Diane. “It's a great group of people and if there's something I ever need, I can reach out for help.”



(L/R) Diane's Aunt True Morgan, Jean and Diane at Rhinelander Walk to End Alzheimer's.