

# Why I Walk

## Chester's Cheetahs

### Walk to End Alzheimer's

#### Milwaukee County

#### **Chester's Cheetahs – Celebrating 25 Years at the Walk to End Alzheimer's - Milwaukee**

For the last quarter of a century, Shirley Sternig and members of her extended family have participated in the Walk to End Alzheimer's – Milwaukee County in honor of Shirley's father, Chester Cieslak. Their journey began in 1999, when Shirley and her twin sister, Sheryl Callow, saw a Walk brochure at a Weight Watchers meeting. "It was just me and Sheryl that first year," said Shirley. "We raised \$245. But I knew we could get a team together, and by 2000, we had a full team."

They named their team Chester's Cheetahs, and over the last 25 years, they have walked countless miles, sporting different t-shirts and many pairs of well-worn walking shoes, and have raised more than \$114,000 to fund care and support for local families along with critical research.

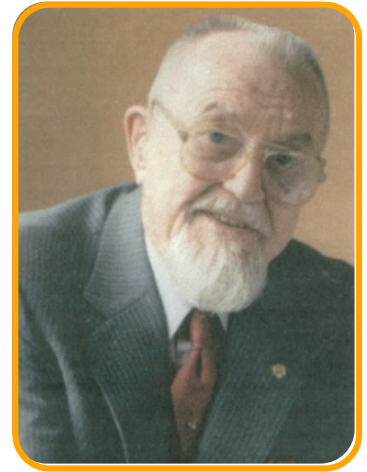
Shirley noticed early that something was wrong with her dad when he started getting lost and forgetting simple information. In 1996, he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's and the family collaborated to care for him. When Chester was in a nursing home, Shirley and her two sisters each spent two nights a week making sure he was comfortable and feeding him dinner.

Chester, once a stern and active man, eventually could not communicate, feed himself, or identify his children. "I saw what my dad went through as he battled this horrible disease," said Shirley. "That's why I'm involved - because I don't want Alzheimer's disease to affect me or anyone else. Our entire family is concerned, so in addition to the Walk, we also participate in Alzheimer's research through the WRAP program in Madison." Wisconsin Registry for Alzheimer's Prevention (WRAP) is a nationally recognized study of over 1700 asymptomatic adult children of persons with Alzheimer's disease with a primary goal to identify the genetic, lifestyle, and environmental factors that eventually lead to the development of Alzheimer's disease in susceptible persons.

Though Chester passed away in 2002, Shirley and her four siblings, Ron, Linda, Carleen, and Sheryl, have continued the fight with their annual participation in Walk to End Alzheimer's, growing their team by including children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. For ten years, the family volunteered in different capacities for the Walk. In 2006 and 2007, Shirley and Carleen served as co-chairs for the Milwaukee County Walk. "That experience really helped me grow because I wasn't naturally comfortable leading a meeting or speaking in public," said Shirley. "But I went on TV and radio to promote the Walk, and our events were very successful, with one of the highest walker and overall fundraising turnouts ever."

Each year, Shirley personalizes a letter for family members to send out requesting donations. "My favorite part of the Walk, believe it or not, is raising the money," said Shirley. "I send out over 200 personal letters with stamped, self-addressed return envelopes to people on my Christmas card list, former co-workers, and email list, and request a donation for the Walk to End Alzheimer's. I also post it on Facebook." After Shirley collects all her donations, she sends out thank you cards to everyone who contributed to the cause. She believes it is very important to say thank you and let their supporters know how much the team raised.

Chester is not just fondly remembered on Walk day. In a touching tribute, Shirley wears her heart on her sleeve – or should we say "wrist" – in the form of a tattoo with the Alzheimer's logo. "I always said I wanted to get a tattoo to honor my dad, Chester," she said. Shirley's daughter, Sara, started the trend, and Mom proudly followed suit on the ten-year anniversary of Chester's passing. "It's a way to carry around his memory forever."



Chester Cieslak



Shirley and Sara's tattoos

