

Honoring a Legacy

MILWAUKEE

Family Carries on Holiday Traditions to Honor a Loved One

For some families, the holidays are challenging when a seat at the table is empty for the first time. While absence is there, Lisa Densing and Ann Parks choose to focus on the wonderful memories of their mother June, who lost her battle with Alzheimer's in December 2021. "Our mother loved Christmas," Lisa shared. "She especially loved making a huge family dinner with more appetizers, dishes, and Christmas cookies than our family could eat in a month. She loved the cookie 'Pecan Fingers.' She had a recipe passed down from her mother, who battled Alzheimer's more than 30 years ago. The entire family continues to make holiday cookies using my mom's recipes."

"Passing on traditions was important to the family," Ann said. "Food and family meals were such a huge part of who my mom was, and we didn't want to lose any of that. When I got married, and my mom was still in early stages, we had her hand-write a lot of her traditional recipes. And even towards the end, we always brought holiday meals to her in her care facility."



June's hand-written recipes.

Explaining Dementia to Teens

At the time of their mother's diagnosis, Lisa had three teen-age boys. "I was always very upfront with the kids," Lisa said. "While they didn't have a lot of questions, I proactively explained the changes they would see now and in the future – she would forget things, become easily flustered, or say things that may not make sense."



2017 family photo. From left: Mike and his two daughters, Ann with husband Lloyd and daughter, June and Dick, Lisa with husband Rick and three sons.

Honoring a Legacy

MILWAUKEE

“Once my mom moved into a care facility, I was proactive in how I managed the kids’ visits,” Lisa said. “This is a devastating disease for anyone, and kids need direction and support. I would often take them to visit her when her care facility had an activity or event going on – then everyone could be engaged in watching something together. I would also take photo albums or certain books so there was something to focus on. In the final stage, I also felt it was important to give them the choice of how often they visited. I wanted to be respectful if they wanted to keep their early memories of her and all the good times they had shared.”

Younger Children’s Perceptions

Ann’s daughter is five year’s old and has very different memories of her grandma. “I was pregnant with my daughter the last time my mom remembered who I was,” Ann said. “It was very difficult to know that my daughter would never know the mom I grew up with. When my daughter was born my mom would smile, but was not able to interact with her the way she would have wanted to.”

“Even though just a toddler, I wanted to be very honest with my daughter,” Ann said. “She had questions about why grandma didn’t talk or live in her house anymore. I tried to use words she would understand and explained she was sick and she couldn’t do all the things that some grandma’s do. Even at age three, she would tell people that her grandma had Alzheimer’s. I am on the Walk to End Alzheimer’s® committee and would bring her with me to meetings and explained that the organization helps other families who experience Alzheimer’s. She loves walk day and her memories of it are all positive – music, games, bubbles and fun memories.”

Utilizing Resources

“Our mom was on a journey with Alzheimer’s for over a decade,” Lisa said. “In her career, she had been an English teacher and loved reading. She was such a kind and caring woman. Her own mother had also lost a battle with dementia and she had cared for her, so she was extremely compassionate. Being a mom and her family were the most important things to her.”

“Over the years, we’ve been so grateful for all the resources from the Alzheimer’s Association and other organizations to support us,” Ann said. “I learned a lot about how to accept where she was in her dementia journey. Early on, I remember being truthful when she’d ask to speak to her deceased mother, but eventually learned to accept her reality and simply say that her mother was busy today and leave it at that. We encourage other families to reach out and take advantage of resources to support them.”