

National Family Caregivers M O N T H

**Honoring
Paul Braun**
Former Caregiver

What Every Family Fears

Alzheimer's disease is a disease that impacts more than 6 million Americans. While the diagnosis is devastating at any age, early onset is especially unsettling for those who many consider in the prime of their lives. This is where Paul and Karen Braun found themselves on March 2, 2007. Karen, age 59, was diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's disease. "My first thoughts were panic, confusion, fear, denial, sadness," Paul shared. "I basically didn't have a clue what I should do or where to go to get information. Like most people, I turned to the internet to find information. I turned to resources from the Alzheimer's Association and read up on everything I could find."



Trading a Career for Caregiving

"Before her diagnosis, Karen and I were living our lives and we both had successful careers," Paul shared. "No one in our families were currently affected by the disease, so I paid little attention to it. But after Karen's diagnosis, that all changed."

Paul was a radio and TV sportscaster for the Wisconsin Badgers for more than 45 years, including 42 years as play-by-play announcer for the Badger's hockey team. Broadcasting was his passion and he had planned to continue his storied career. "Initially, I tried to keep doing broadcasting and taking care of Karen," Paul said. "But quickly it became apparent that I couldn't do both. My caregiving was affecting my work, but more importantly, the quality of care I was giving Karen. I made the difficult decision to retire."



"People need to understand that caregivers have dreams and goals for their own lives," Paul said. "However, when you become a caregiver, you have to put those things on hold. While it was very difficult to retire, I never second-guessed it. "

Caregiver Challenges

"If you look up the definition of a caregiver, it is defined as, 'to watch over; be responsible for,'" Paul said. "That does not even begin to describe the challenges a caregiver faces. It's a rollercoaster of emotions and your responsibilities are enormous. You will face mental and physical challenges. You need to be flexible, patient and prepared to make difficult decisions."

"As a husband, I had to come to terms with the fact that my best friend and wife was going away," Paul shared. "You have to be honest with yourself about what you are facing and accept the fact that your life is changing. This was a journey I was unprepared for. I liken it to the analogy of being asked to broadcast a game last minute. I wouldn't know the numbers of the players, the stats, or have any background on the teams. In other words I would be totally unprepared to do that game."



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“There are also significant financial burdens that caregivers need to be prepared for with the care of someone with Alzheimer’s,” Paul shared. “Karen’s care, medications, and attorney fees, to name a few, were all significant expenses that I needed to plan for as her primary caregiver.”

“There is also the immense sense of loss you have, even while your loved one is still with you,” Paul shared. “Karen loved fishing and we had enjoyed it for years. Shortly before she passed away, I took her fishing. I put the rod in her hand and almost immediately it became apparent she didn’t know what it was for, how to hold it, cast it or reel it in. That day was one of the saddest of my life. That’s what this disease does to people.”

“Self-care is very important for caregivers as well,” Paul said. “While you will find that the needs of your loved one will take precedence, you have to take care of yourself so you can be the best caregiver you can be. Don’t try to do it all alone or be overly critical of yourself for how you’re caregiving. Ask for help and take a break. You need that time away to catch your breath, relax and calm down.”

Heartbreaking Decision

“Karen was very independent and when we started on this journey I made a promise to her that I would never send her to a facility,” Paul said. “I took care of her for five years at home, but we reached a cross-road and several situations drove me to rethink my promise. First, I was at my primary Dr. and he could see the impact my own health was suffering with my caregiving duties. He asked me who would take care of Karen if something happened to me and that made me take pause.”

“The other incident that was the final straw was a day Karen truly became someone I didn’t know,” Paul said. “I was watching TV and I heard Karen yelling at a floor length mirror in our living room. She was using profanity and yelling at her reflection to ‘get that woman out of here.’ When I put my arms around her to calm her, she slapped me and yelled that I was trying to kill her. It was the toughest day of my life, but I decided then I had to make the agonizing decision to break my promise and move her to a memory care facility.”

Turning Tragedy into Awareness

“I lost Karen in 2015 and since that time I’ve had a lot of time to reflect on our journey,” Paul shared. “It’s given me time to heal, adjust to life without my best friend, and start living again. I am not going to kid you. It has been a long and tough road. I’ve also had time to develop another game plan. I want to use my background in broadcasting to create awareness for this devastating disease and all the resources that are out there to support families. The best way I know how to do this is to share my story.”

In 2018 and 2019 Paul helped initiate and promote the Birdies to End Alzheimer’s Campaign raising more than \$113,000 for the Alzheimer’s Research Center at UW Hospital. In 2021 Paul was the Honorary Co-Chair for the Walk to End Alzheimer’s in Wisconsin, which raised more than \$2 million. He is a year-round spokesperson for the Alzheimer’s Association Wisconsin Chapter in our fight against Alzheimer’s and all dementias.

Thank you to Paul for being a Champion and Advocate for Alzheimer’s awareness. Paul’s personal experiences and his extensive background in broadcasting gives him the credibility and communications skills that helps educate the public, media, legislators and families. He offers insights that benefit people as they navigate the debilitating disease with their loved ones.