

## Make the Most of Each Day

### *Early Onset Alzheimer's*

**Sharon and Chuck Zimmer**, Onalaska, WI (La Crosse Area)

Sharon is a caregiver for her husband Chuck, who has early onset Alzheimer's. This is a difficult diagnosis for many families, especially since loved ones may still be in the prime of their older years. "When Chuck was diagnosed, he didn't even know what dementia was," shares Sharon. "He was a Director of Financial Services in his career, so this early diagnosis was shocking. We had many tests done to get answers, in order to fully understand."

For those on a journey with early onset Alzheimer's, Sharon's biggest advice is to stay active and not let the diagnosis define you. She and Chuck have a very active life, which she feels is critical. Families can live a fruitful life with purpose, even after an Alzheimer's diagnosis. Chuck is very active – golfing multiple times a week, working out at the YMCA, spending time at the library and getting fresh air every day. The couple eats out frequently, works on puzzles, has visited most of Wisconsin State Parks and listens to music (preferably live) whenever they can.

She and Chuck will also be walking the Walk to End Alzheimer's La Crosse Walk. They are walking with friends this year to increase awareness and funds for Alzheimer's research.

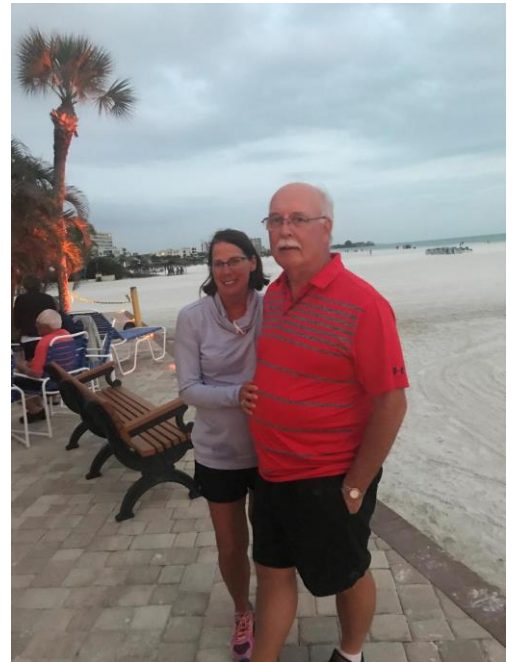
#### **Build a Network of Support**

There are many resources that have benefited the Zimmer's. Chuck joined a support group through the Alzheimer's Association and has connected with several people from the group on a consistent basis. They also participate in many programs through their YMCA, library and Park and Rec. "We joined as many things as we could to keep Chuck's brain active," says Sharon.

Sharon leaves detailed lists for Chuck when she goes to work as an incentive to check off the list. "I try to give him the dignity he deserves because he was a strong community person," says Sharon. "If he's in a new environment, he will present his dementia card, as his speech is slurred. But he's not afraid to ask questions."

#### **Self-Care for the Caregiver**

In Wisconsin alone, there are over 195,000 people caring for a loved one living with Alzheimer's or dementia. Sharon continues to work full time and is grateful for her companies support and flexibility to support her family. Sharon is determined to keep she and Chuck active and living every day to its fullest. She recognizes the need for self-care and takes a few hours for herself every Thursday to get a massage or manicure.





Sharon also participates in several outside groups – online support groups, park and rec classes and church – to give her an outlet. “Establishing a network is important for a caregiver,” says Sharon. “I don’t like negativity and I’ve learned that you can’t sweat the small stuff. Even if you have just one person to vent to, it’s important.”