

## Meet Our 2009 Champions

As a mother of two grown daughters, wife, and entrepreneur, Judy Niekamp has always been an active and vibrant woman. Her mission in life is not unlike many other women in their early sixties - to have meaningful relationships, a loving and healthy family and continued opportunities for personal growth and fulfillment.

Judy also has Alzheimer's disease.

Her journey with the disease began in the fall of 2004 when she and her husband, Ken, were in the Chicago area visiting Judy's sister, Patsy, a registered nurse. While Patsy and Judy were fixing the evening meal, Patsy noticed that Judy was having trouble sequencing the steps in meal preparation, a routine Judy had accomplished thousands of times while raising a family. In a subsequent visit, Patsy performed a mini mental exam on Judy and encouraged her to see a physician.



In May, 2005, after extensive testing, Judy received the news that she was one of about 500,000 individuals in the United States who suffer from early onset Alzheimer's disease.

She was just 59.

Early onset includes anyone diagnosed with the disease who is 65 years old or younger.

For the next two and a half years the couple dealt with the news the best they could, which included informing family and close friends. Judy gave up her work as a seamstress, work she had done from her Peoria home for many years. They also thought about joining a support group to meet other people who were dealing with the same issues. In September, 2000, they walked into the Central Illinois Chapter Alzheimer's Association office in Peoria.

Ken readily admits that contacting the Association took courage. "Coming here meant we were admitting the truth," he says. "But what a relief it was. We immediately met compassionate, loving, caring staff and when we walked out of the office, we felt a big burden had been lifted."

"Help was on the way," echoed Judy.

Since that time both Ken and Judy have taken advantage of the Chapter's programs and services. They have attended the early stage programs, Facing New Challenges and Making Sense of Memory Loss, and a middle stage program, Caregiver Challenge Series, and a Legal and Financial Educational Program. They also recently took advantage of a Medic Alert + Safe Return Registration Day to complete paperwork to receive a national safety identification bracelet.

A program they have both greatly enjoyed has been the Early Stage Support Group specifically designed for individuals and their caregivers, whether the caregiver is a spouse, parent, child, or friend.

"I like it because I'm with people who are in the same boat," says Judy. "And we're all going to the same place – we all have something in common."

Ken heartily agrees. "You meet so many nice people," he states. "It gives you an opportunity to ask questions and share advice with people who are going through the same thing." "The local Alzheimer's Association has changed our attitude about the disease," says Ken as he sits by his wife of 43 years with whom he takes a daily two to three mile walk. "We're educated. We love life!"

Ken and Judy are this year's 2009 Champions for the Chapter. In this role they will help the Association bring awareness to the disease by telling their story.

"We want to emphasize that Alzheimer's doesn't happen to just the elderly. It happens to people of all ages," Ken says. "With a positive attitude there is a lot of good living yet to be done!"

**Ken and Judy's Personal Goals as Champions:**

- To encourage family and friends to participate in the Chapter's Memory Walks and raise funds and awareness about Alzheimers.
- Send letters and emails to state and federal legislators requesting they get involved to help fight this disease.
- Bring attention and support to the Chapter so it can expand services to better educate the public.