

## One Family's Story

Alzheimer's disease can be difficult to recognize, as Susan\* discovered. She and her husband Jim reside in the Twin Cities, living lives similar to many suburban families. Their journey with Alzheimer's began less than two years ago, when Susan received a phone call from Jim's work. His employer said that in the last six-month period, Jim didn't seem to be able to do the work tasks he'd been doing easily for decades. They were concerned, so Jim and Susan decided to try to find some answers. Looking back, Susan recalls that she had noticed that Jim didn't seem to be as satisfied with work or working as much prior to that phone call, but at the time she didn't think anything of it.

Jim and Susan visited a neurologist, who ran tests to try to diagnose the problem. After the first neurologist they saw did not want to give a diagnosis, they saw a second neurologist who ran additional tests and finally diagnosed Jim with Alzheimer's. Jim was only 55 years old. That neurologist recommended that Jim and Susan contact the Alzheimer's Association Minnesota-North Dakota to take advantage of the Association's programs and services.

Susan had seen *The Forgetting: A Portrait of Alzheimer's* on Twin Cities Public Television, so she was aware of Alzheimer's disease, but she wanted to know more so that she and Jim could make better decisions about what they should do next. She contacted the Alzheimer's Association and joined a support group, so that she could talk to other caregivers on a regular basis. She began attending some of the Association's family education classes, to learn more about the disease and how it affects people's lives. She also has used the telephone helpline and the Association's web site as resources in their decision making.

Since Jim received the diagnosis, he has retired from his job. Susan continues to work full-time, and, since Jim is in the early stages of Alzheimer's, his memory loss and other symptoms have been somewhat managed with medication. Jim has enrolled in the Association's Safe Return program, which assists in the safe and timely return of individuals with Alzheimer's disease and related dementias in the event that they wander and become lost. Jim got a dog to keep him company during the day while Susan is at work, and Susan and Jim do activities together to keep their brains active—daily walks, board games like checkers and Yahtzee and jigsaw puzzles.

According to Susan, one of the messages she received from the Association was that it's important for Jim to feel that he is still very important to her and their children. "It is important to me and our children that Jim always feels part of any decision made. For example, he feels better when he is given a job and can accomplish it, even if he is a little slower. It is such an accomplishment for him to feel useful."

Like many families facing Alzheimer's, they don't know what each day will bring, but they continue to make their lives about living and not about the disease. "I'm thankful for the Alzheimer's Association," said Susan, "because they are helping my family cope now, and I know they'll be there to help us as we continue to live with the disease."

*\*names changed to protect personal privacy*