



Statement of Marilyn Blum
Owings Mills, MD
for
Champion Nursing Coalition Launch
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Good morning to the representatives of the various organizations participating in the Champion Nursing Coalition, panelists and other distinguished guests. My name is Marilyn Blum, and I am happy to join today to share with you my story as an Alzheimer caregiver for my husband, Steve, who joining us is here today -- and the invaluable support I have received from our nurse, Carol Wynne – who is also here today. I'd like to thank the Alzheimer's Association – particularly the Greater Maryland Chapter – for inviting me to attend.

My husband Steve is one of the more than 5 million Americans living with Alzheimer's disease and I represent one of the 10 million family caregivers struggling daily to confront the challenges of this disease. Steve was diagnosed with Alzheimer's at age 60 – a diagnosis that was not a surprise given his family history. His father was diagnosed with dementia in his 40's and died about 10 years later.

Steve's memory problems began quietly enough. He was a very successful CPA – employed as the Chief Financial Officer of a public relations firm. It was a very demanding job but one he was always very adept and capable of managing. Eventually, he began to go into the office more – sometimes seven days a week. His assistant had been let go, and he had to take on her work as well as his own. At least, this is what I understood, but in fact, the work had begun to be more challenging for him and he had to devote a lot more time to stay on top of it.

Eventually Steve was laid off when his company was bought by a larger company and it eliminated his job. It really was a blessing because it then gave us the chance to focus on dealing with his memory problems. Although we shared with Steve's internist that his father was diagnosed with Alzheimer's at a young age, he still was reluctant to identify what Steve had as Alzheimer's. Instead he diagnosed it as depression and put Steve on antidepressants. Unsatisfied with this, I pressed on and sought out a psychotherapist, who suggested Steve take further tests. After numerous tests, Steve was finally diagnosed with cognitive impairment with probable Alzheimer's disease.

It was what we both thought and what we both feared - and it turned our lives upside down. It was challenging to navigate this new terrain – for Steve and for me as well – especially since I was also the primary caregiver of my 93-year old father. I had more than I ever imagined on my plate, and I will tell you, it is very, very easy to become

overwhelmed. We sought help and information from our local Alzheimer's Association chapter and they have been terrific to us. They were instrumental also in leading us to Carol Wynne.

Carol is a geriatric nurse who specializes in Alzheimer's and dementia. She facilitated an eight week pilot program for individuals with younger-onset, those under age 65 with Alzheimer's disease. The program helped to shed light on the basics of Alzheimer's, and also included counseling sessions for caregivers and individuals with the disease. The program was a lifesaver for us, and it really was due to the invaluable insight, information and experience Carol provided.

Carol has become a member of the family – she's my coach and sounding board. I talk to her almost daily. With her vast experience in the field, she offers me different ways to approach things. She's there for moral support, practical guidance and so much more. She knows what I'm going through because in her more than 30 years in the profession she's seen it so many times before.

I've learned when dealing with a disease like Alzheimer's, it is essential to have your care team in place. We have a good relationship with Steve's doctor, and he's excellent in providing us with what we need, medically – and don't get me wrong, we appreciate it tremendously. But what Carol gives us is different. She's in the trenches with us – she's just as invested in our lives and future, as we are. She helps me to manage Steve's medications, moods and care. She is truly there for our family and has made our lives better.

There are three things I know:

- I know Alzheimer's is a devastating disease.
- I know as the baby boomers get older – more lives will be impacted by it.
- I know we face a nursing shortage at a time when boomers are at increased risk for developing Alzheimer's and other deadly chronic conditions.

It is vitally important that there be a nursing workforce that is equipped and trained to deal with this growing crisis. I am fortunate to have Carol in my life – but she's only one person, and we need millions more like her to really be prepared to deal with the challenges of an aging society.

I applaud the Champion Nursing Coalition and its effort to educate the public and lawmakers about the critical role nurses play in our health care system – these unsung heroes are crucial in saving, protecting, prolonging, and enhancing lives.

I'd like to thank Steve for being my life partner and Carol for being my care partner.

I'd also like to thank AARP, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and the Alzheimer's Association for inviting me here to share my story with you today.

Thank you very much.