

# Mary Kay Baum: There's life after Alzheimer's

Susan Troller, Capital Times  
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Activist Mary Kay Baum is battling early onset Alzheimer's disease and she feels better today than she did a couple of years ago.

Baum, 61, is a former nun, Lutheran pastor, attorney, elected official and former director of the Madison-area Urban Ministry. Sunday morning she spoke at Bethel Lutheran Church about her pioneering efforts to lessen the symptoms of the disease and to bring hope to individuals and families affected by Alzheimer's.

"I'm here to talk about living well with Alzheimer's," she told the attentive audience as she began speaking.

Baum said that she had found that focusing on photography, reducing over-stimulation and avoiding toxins like artificial sweeteners and MSG had been helpful to her, along with healthy eating, physical therapy, some prescription medication to reduce tremors and vitamins and herbs.

"It's not just one thing that has helped me feel better," she explained. "In addition to nutrition, nurturance and environment, I would add the notion that you need to have meaning in life."

Part of the meaning Baum has found is becoming an advocate for those with Alzheimer's.

She sits on the board of the Alzheimer's Association South Central Wisconsin, and regularly speaks to civic groups, church groups and others about the disease. She has also spoken with lawmakers in Congress during a national Alzheimer's Association policy meeting.



Although much of the medical establishment is skeptical about the notion that Alzheimer's patients can improve, Baum said that early diagnosis is critical.

"I wouldn't be speaking today if I hadn't had early intervention," she said.

Two years ago, Baum stepped down as director of the Madison-area Urban Ministry, citing health concerns that she said had become so pressing she could no longer perform her job.

She was beset by constant fatigue, memory loss and inability to focus for long periods of time. She also found it increasingly difficult to supervise her staff.

Both her mother and an aunt died of Alzheimer's, and her younger sister, Chris Baum VanRyzin, had already begun struggling with some of the cognitive deficits of the disease, so she knew many of the symptoms of the dreaded disease, which is described in medical literature as incurable, degenerative and terminal.

She also found that she was falling down.

"Who would have known that walking is a cognitive task?" she asked.

With help from physical therapy to improve her balance, she was able to get the falls under control. She was also assertive about addressing other areas of her life and health in hopes of halting or slowing down the progress of the disease.

A peaceful life as part of a cooperative farm community has been a help, she said, as has her photography. Her favorite subjects are landscapes and the natural world.

Baum and her sister, who has also seen improvements in her symptoms by taking charge of her medical care with a mix of traditional and non-traditional methods, are at the forefront of changes surrounding expectations for those diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's.

"If we can delay the time of treatment by several years, the savings, especially in the era of aging baby boomers, can be tremendous," Baum said. And that's to say nothing about the vast improvements in quality of life for patients and their families.

Baum said this latest crusade is as rewarding as anything as she has ever done in a life filled with advocacy.

On Friday, Dec. 12 from 4:30 to 8 p.m. there will be a gallery show and reception for Baum's photography in the Fireside Room at Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave.