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## Living in the Moment

*By Sue Watkins, Spouse and Caregiver*

“Well, this doesn’t make sense!” For the second month in a row, my highly intelligent husband could not balance the checkbook. Lew worked in the finance industry for over fifty years, working his way up from a branch manager for Household Finance to the Executive Vice-President of a major auto finance company. Numbers were always his thing and he was a whiz at math. For him to have trouble balancing the checkbook was unthinkable, but here it was.

There had been other signs of memory issues but how does one know whether these signs and symptoms were part of the aging process, or something more serious. Lew was in his early seventies when he started having occasional episodes of Transient Global Amnesia, a temporary loss of memory that passes in a few hours. After the first episode, Lew was tested for a stroke. Included in the numerous tests was an MRI of the brain. Although no stroke was diagnosed, the MRI served as a baseline for later Alzheimer diagnostic tests.

In retrospect, we realized that there were a number of signs and symptoms related to Alzheimer’s Disease. Loss of interest in activities he once enjoyed were the more obvious ones, although we didn’t realize it at the time. He gradually stopped playing golf with the guys – three times a week and participation in team play, slowly dropped to once a week and no team play. Participation in an online football pool with good friends and our son had netted Lew some nice winnings. He enjoyed studying the teams and making his picks for which teams would win. This activity involved a lot of jesting, teasing, and male bonding in addition to the mental exercise. No



one could understand why he decided not to participate anymore and no amount of coaxing by friends and loved ones changed his mind.

After the problem occurred with the checkbook, our longtime family physician referred him to a neurologist. Tests and analysis involved blood tests, memory and cognitive exercises, physical examination, and an MRI of the brain. The MRI, when compared to the previous imaging, showed a significant loss of brain matter. The memory and cognitive tests confirmed the diagnosis of early onset Alzheimer’s Disease.

Lew found the diagnosis to be a relief. Now he knew why these odd things had been happening to him. I, on the other hand went into mourning. I was devastated. I believed his life was over and our wonderful life together was past. I am an organizer and planner by nature. I quickly learned that Alzheimer’s Disease is not something you can organize or plan. I felt so helpless.

The one thing we could do is learn as much about the disease as possible. Over the next six months we spent hours reading everything we could find about the disease. We attended workshops offered by the local chapter of the Alzheimer’s Association: Help and Hope, The Savvy Caregiver, and the Confident Caregiver Series. Attendance at a local caregiver’s

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*Continued from page 1:*

support group has been a lifesaver for me. We also participated in a writing workshop so we could tell “Our Love Story.”

We also learned to share the diagnosis with loved ones and friends. The more open we were about Lew having the disease, the more understanding and support we received. We were making plans to drop out of our couple’s golf traveling group and a number of other social activities. Fortunately our friends wouldn’t hear of it. As they explained, we are all getting older and will have physical and mental problems – we plan to all grow old together.

Lew has a wonderful sense of humor and is pragmatic by nature. He has never denied having the disease and is the first one to acknowledge that losing track of strokes on the golf course or not knowing what hole he is playing, is due to his Alzheimer’s.

A significant “ah ha” moment was when we realized that life was not over. We have been married for over forty years and love to travel. When we first received the diagnosis of Alzheimer’s Disease, we thought traveling was over and how fortunate we had been to experience the joys afforded through all the countries we had visited and the friends we had made. A couple of months prior to the diagnosis, we took a cruise to Canada and Alaska. Within a very short time, Lew didn’t remember anything about it. I thought, why spend money on trips he won’t remember.

That first year following the diagnosis was spent learning everything we could about the disease, treatment options, support, and outcomes. The second year we started living our lives again. One day I looked at Lew and realized that it isn’t about what he remembers, or doesn’t – life is really about living in the moment.

During the second year we took numerous short golf trips with friends, a nineteen day cruise through the Panama Canal with close friends, two road trips – one to Oregon where we met friends in Shady Cove for a week, and another to Sedona, Arizona where we shared a two-bedroom condo with other friends for golf and fun.

When we were dating we discovered we both loved to play Cribbage. We also enjoy party bridge. Two years post diagnosis, we still play Cribbage every day and bridge often. Lew might not remember the day of the week or the month of the year, but he can still bid and play a great game of cards.

We still play golf, but I have a better chance of beating him now. He prefers playing with me alone or with other couples, as that is where his comfort level is.

Our son, daughter-in-law, and grandsons live about thirty miles from us. We get to see them often and they provide love and support. Our grandsons are wonderful. At Lew’s 75<sup>th</sup> birthday dinner our son asked one of the boys to show Lew where the bathroom was. The response, a quick “Come on Pops.” Our son recently spent an afternoon videotaping a



*Sue and Lew Watkins*

conversation with his Dad about his past, his favorite things, his most memorable experiences, and life in general, as a visual and audio record for their children. I am still working on our “Love Story.” I have finished “Lew’s Story” and have started “Our Story.” We have had such a wonderful life together; we want to share it with our grandsons.

Two years post diagnosis, Lew’s disease has progressed to the point that he can’t drive anymore. His response to the news about losing his driver’s license was to send out an email to friends and family announcing he is taking applications for chauffeurs. Life is wonderful when you have a sense of humor and roll with the punches. God has graced us with so much.

One late afternoon we were sitting on the bank of the Rogue River with our friends watching the fishing and rafting when Lew turned to me and said – “we are having the best time, I’m sorry I won’t be able to remember it.” I raised my glass of wine, Lew raised his can of beer, and we toasted to “Living in the Moment.”



**Note from the editor:** After finding out that they would be fighting against Alzheimer’s Disease, Lew and Sue Watkins have risen to the challenge, becoming fierce and vocal advocates for our community. In 2012, Lew bravely spoke about his own personal experience to a crowd of over a thousand people at the Walk to END Alzheimer’s in Santa Barbara. Sue graciously makes herself always available to provide support and encouragement to other spouses facing the disease. Lew is now serving as a board member at the Alzheimer’s Association California Central Chapter. With grace and high spirits, courage and commitment to a world without Alzheimer’s, Sue and Lew are a source of inspiration to all of us! - *Luciana Cramer, Jan. 2014*