On June 21, 2015, Matt Steele set out on a hike with a deep sense of purpose. As he navigated the densely wooded trail carved into Kinsman Ridge — one of New Hampshire’s 48 alpine peaks with elevations over 4,000 feet — he reflected on his life with Margie, his wife of 34 years, whom he lost to younger-onset Alzheimer’s the year prior.

Matt’s trek was part of The Longest Day®, an Alzheimer’s Association event held annually on the summer solstice that asks participants to fight Alzheimer’s through a fundraising and awareness activity of their choice. Matt, his children, their families and a network of other teams collectively climbed all 48 peaks in a single day. To date, they have raised $300,000 in Margie’s honor through this event.

Margie was deeply compassionate, with an innate desire to serve her community. She co-founded and managed the town’s first food pantry, for which she was recognized with the Cohasset Citizen of the Year award in 2006.

Volunteers at the food pantry were among the first to notice something wasn’t quite right with Margie. She had always been extremely organized but began making mistakes, such as buying the wrong quantities of food. Matt noticed changes at home as well; Margie had trouble remembering appointments and balancing the checkbook, tasks she used to complete with ease.

Increasingly concerned, Matt was determined to find out the cause. Alzheimer’s disease never crossed his mind, and even Margie’s primary care physician dismissed the possibility because at 50 years old, she was simply “too young.”

After years of testing to rule out other conditions, the Steeles sought the help of a neurologist. They turned to Reisa Sperling, M.D., director of the Center for Alzheimer Research and Treatment at Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston. Dr. Sperling gave them their answer: Margie had younger-
onset Alzheimer’s, the form of the disease marked by symptoms occurring before age 65.

The news shook Matt to his core. “I couldn’t believe that my young and active wife could have Alzheimer’s,” he says. “I thought this disease was only for older people.”

Dr. Sperling recommended that Matt, who served as Margie’s primary caregiver, contact the Alzheimer’s Association 24/7 Helpline.

“It was wonderful to be able to say, ‘Here’s what’s going on in my house’ and have somebody understand, listen and offer advice,” Matt says. “I felt like I had a partner in facing this disease.”

After living with Alzheimer’s for eight years, Margie passed away in 2014 at age 58. Matt finds comfort in knowing he was at Margie’s side every step of the way, just as she was with him in spirit as he climbed Kinsman Ridge on The Longest Day — and as she continues to be today.

Matt recently honored Margie by making a $100,000 gift to the Association from the Margie Steele Foundation. The donation will support a study led by Dr. Sperling that will test anti-amyloid treatments in people as young as 60 who are at risk of developing Alzheimer’s.

“Philanthropic support can take a nascent project and make it a reality in a very short period of time,” says Dr. Sperling.

“I’ve got to do my part for future generations,” Matt says. “There’s a lot of ground to cover, but I’m hopeful.”

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-MATT STEELE