

# Six Sisters Supporting their Mother

## A JOURNEY WITH DEMENTIA

### Don't Ignore the Signs

Colleen Atkinson is the proud mother of 6 daughters – Dawn, Shelly, Beth, Krista, Pam and Penny. This tight knit family – all living within an hour of each other – has been put to the ultimate test on their journey with dementia. Colleen was diagnosed with Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI) at the age of 61. “We started noticing that mom seemed to get confused about things, was becoming more forgetful and was repeating questions we had already answered,” Colleen’s daughter Beth shared. “My sisters and I assumed it was just typical signs of aging. It wasn’t glaring things, and if only one of us had noticed, we could have chalked it up to stress or a bad day. But when my sisters and I started comparing notes of the different things we were noticing, we couldn’t ignore it.”



**Colleen Atkinson and her 6 daughters,  
Mount Calvary, Fond du Lac County**

“My sisters and I decided to have “family meeting” to talk with mom,” Beth said. “At first she said it was only old age, but when we started listing all the things we were seeing, she agreed to pursue testing.”

### What is MCI

“When my mom was going through all of the testing, no one even thought about the possibility of dementia or Alzheimer’s disease,” Beth said. “My mom was just too young for us to even consider this type of diagnosis. She was working a full-time job, a part-time job and leading a very busy life. We certainly had never heard of Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI) or have any idea what those words meant.”

After meeting with Colleen’s primary doctor and then a neurologist, she was diagnosed with MCI. And while MCI doesn’t always progress to Alzheimer’s, Colleen’s diagnosis was progressive and eventually has led to Alzheimer’s disease.

### The Sibling Network

“I can’t imagine being on this journey without my sisters to help,” Beth shared. “We’re very blessed that there are so many of us and we’re so close. We divide up responsibilities – finances, medications, doctors’ appointments – all taking turns. I can’t imagine if I was trying to do this alone.”

“My parents have been using in-home care to help my mom,” Beth shared. “But my sisters and I also have a Google calendar we sign up to make sure mom always has support.”

### Get Educated

“One tip I have for anyone on this journey is to get yourself educated about disease,” Beth said. “My sisters and I have taken education classes from the Alzheimer’s Association and my dad participated in a Male Support Group. It’s so important to plan for the future – how to communicate with your loved one, how to get support, how to find a caregiver – it took all of us to get our hands around options.”



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### Creating Awareness

“Because our mom was diagnosed so early in life, it hits especially hard for my sisters and I,” Beth said. “We want to spread awareness and let people know that this can happen to you. We weren’t prepared, and I don’t want other families to be caught off-guard.”

To support the mission, their family has gotten involved in the Walk to End Alzheimer’s®. Colleen’s childhood nickname was “Couge,” so it seemed like a natural fit for their Walk team to be “Couge’s Crew.” They started a team in 2015 with about 10 members and in 2021 had over 50 members. In 2022, Beth and her sisters Penny and Pam are Co-Chairs for the Walk to End Alzheimer’s Fond du Lac County.

“Even though she can’t walk, mom still comes each year to watch us walk,” Beth shared. “My mom continues to be very positive and happy, which is truly a blessing. She still knows who we all are, which is a bigger blessing! We are thankful for the Alzheimer’s Association to provide our family with education, support, and research to hopefully one day find a cure.”

