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A Love Story



“If you’ve met one person with Alzheimer’s disease, you’ve met one person with Alzheimer’s disease.” Lino Darchun says this to emphasize the fact that every person with Alzheimer’s is unique and their experience with the disease is as individual as they are.

In 2002, Lino’s wife, Sydnee, was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease. She was 58 years old. Sydnee was working as a flight attendant for American Airlines where she had gradually worked her way up to the coveted First Class galley position. “Sydnee was truly a consummate professional,” says her proud husband.

But that January, Lino started getting calls from Sydnee’s supervisor. She asked if Sydnee was taking any medications or having health problems. The supervisor told Lino that Sydnee had been forgetting to turn on the ovens, mixing up the order of the courses and exhibiting other lapses.

After receiving the call, Lino thought about the unusual behaviors he had seen himself. During the preceding months, he witnessed Sydnee buying pumpkins for Halloween in August and placing Post-Its all over the house as reminders. “She’d never needed reminders before,” said Lino. “Slam! dunk! was how she handled everything.”

“All alone with Alzheimer’s”

Lino took Sydnee to see a neurologist who gave them a diagnosis of Early Onset Alzheimer’s disease (Alzheimer’s disease that affects a person under age 65). Lino says they were both relieved to finally have a diagnosis and began to feel better. But, as the weeks passed and Sydnee’s symptoms worsened, they felt lost and frustrated. “I realized she wasn’t going to get better,” Lino said. “I felt all alone with Alzheimer’s.”

Like many in his position, Lino turned to the Internet for help. It was there that he found the Alzheimer’s Association. “Thank God for the Alzheimer’s Association,” Lino says. Searching the site, he found several programs that could help him and Sydnee navigate the rough waters of this disease. “Although we had received a diagnosis and a prescription for Aricept, we had no idea what was ahead for us. Until I visited the Website, I wasn’t aware there were any resources or support.”

Living with Alzheimer's

With the help of the Alzheimer's Association's Greater Illinois Chapter and Northwestern's Cognitive Neurology and Alzheimer's Disease Center, Lino found support groups for both caregivers and persons with dementia, and he and Sydnee began attending them regularly. Lino says the support group allowed Sydnee to interact with others who were experiencing the same fears and anxieties.

During one of the support group meetings, Lino says his group heard "gales of laughter" from the other room and said the sound was "heartwarming." "We were so used to our loved ones not laughing anymore, that hearing that sound again was magical." In his support group, Lino was able to share his feelings and experiences with other caregivers who understood what he was going through.

Life Goes On

Last spring, Sydnee moved to an assisted living facility near their home in Lincoln Park. Lino visits frequently and says he always tries to make these times as pleasant as possible. He treats Sydnee like the individual she is, knows how to orchestrate the conversation so it's more enjoyable for her and avoids correcting her or trying to make her adapt to him. "If that's all I can give my wife at this point in her disease, I'm happy about that," Lino says.

When asked if she still remembers who he is, Lino hesitates. "She still recognizes me, but I don't think she understands the concept of husband any more," he says. "I'm not distressed by that," he adds. "She knows I'm someone important, someone she cares for. And she still packs a hell of a kiss!"

On November 11th Lino and Sydnee celebrated their 27th wedding anniversary.

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