

Alzheimer's Association Listenline

Art Smith - Transcript

Glynn Washington: Acclaimed chef Art Smith has cooked for multiple presidents and Oprah, so he knows a thing or two about pleasing a crowd.

Art Smith: I have to tell you, you know, growing up as a gay man at South ain't easy, and one of the easiest ways to make people love you is to feed them. Food is that wonderful, delicious conduit that brings us all together. I remembered these stoic, very strong women who were multitalented. And great cooks and they had the ability to bring people together in good times and bad times, all kinds of times with food.

Glynn: Art's mother – well, Addie Mae Smith, is one of these women.

Art: And um, and my mother was a fantastic baker.

Glynn: When art would have his blue days, his mom would be like:

Art: "You know me? Hey, you don't feel good. Let me bake you a cake." I mean, I do believe cake fixes everything.

Glynn: But Art started to notice things that even cake couldn't fix. His mother, Addie, she started acting different.

Art: You know, they're a little, there were just small things, but they were, you know, they were adding up. She would lose her balance a lot. Um, easily getting confused, getting irritated easily. I just, I just, I knew, I mean, I knew my mother so well. I could tell that she just wasn't herself. I noted that she was getting more and more forgetful and, and she would answer me back, "well, my doctor says I'm at an age that would be," and she was at the time, about 76, 77.

Glynn: Art was close with his mom. So she was familiar with Art's friends.

Art: And one of my friends with me said, "Art, you need to watch your mother. Cause I'm really concerned that possibly your mom may have dementia." I kept checking on mom and then my family reached out to me and they said, well, Art, we're worried about your mom. And that's when I moved home back to Florida. It was hard because I was used to this very strong woman who had kept her family together. I don't think about it, you know? And she was a caretaker as well as working at the office and a mom.

Glynn: Art did not know what to do. Except that he wanted to spend time with his mom and speak to her.

Art: I said, I'm concerned about you. You know, you're, you know, you're getting forgetful. And then she kind of lashed out at me and said, "you're being hateful." I'm like, no, I'm not. I'm just bringing something to your attention. She would get irritated really easy when questioned. So she knew, and I believe this, they know something's wrong

with them. Okay. But she didn't want to accept it, and she didn't want people to notice it. And so I knew that my mother was the most amazing, beautiful, lovely woman, and she was being challenged. But the fact was she was, that was still there, but it was, this was, this was not her speaking. It was the illness speaking. Um, and it's, and it's, so, it's hard. We did find a doctor that, that really understood where we were coming from.

Glynn: Seeing a doctor was an important step. They continued to have conversations.

Art: The conversation we had was just, I'm your son and I'd love you and if there's anything you need, I'm here. And I know there may be times you can't understand, but I'm here and to do whatever you need.

Glynn: It was hard for them to talk about Alzheimer's directly, but eventually she did find a way to open up.

Art: She didn't say it to me, but she said it to my sister law and she said, "there'll be a day when I won't know who you are." And I think what, what was hard for me and hard for the family is that she'll never get better. And, um, cause in my heart I'm a fixer and I'm just like, she is. I mean, she was, and my grandma, we fix things. Most importantly, I didn't give up. I did honor her wishes. She lived in her own home. She had a companion. I made sure that she had a life as normal as possible. I just, you know, to me it was important that she get delicious homemade, wonderful food and wanted her to see and do as much as possible. And cause I, I knew in my heart that it wasn't going to be long. You know, there comes to a place where you just, you're just there just to love them and protect them.

Glynn: That was Chef Art Smith on the food, conversation, and openness in dealing with Alzheimer's. To hear more stories, we now return to the Alzheimer's Association Listenline menu.