

# Taking the Fight to New Heights



Matt Steele and Dr. Reisa Sperling

## REISA SPERLING, M.D.

Dr. Sperling is a trailblazer in the Alzheimer's research field, leading several major studies focused on disease prevention. As primary investigator for the landmark Anti-Amyloid Treatment in Asymptomatic Alzheimer's study (A4), she is spearheading efforts to test an anti-amyloid drug on individuals with abnormally high levels of amyloid in their brains who show no signs of cognitive decline. Association donors funded the Longitudinal Evaluation of Amyloid Risk and Neurodegeneration (LEARN) companion study, which will further increase insights into the possibility of prevention.

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.

Matt and Margie met at Babson College in 1975, married shortly after graduation and moved to Cohasset, Massachusetts. Matt began a successful career with ZRC Worldwide, a company specializing in the production of zinc coatings, where he now serves as president and CEO. Margie worked as a retail manager before leaving the workforce to stay home with their three children, Caroline, Sam and Grace.

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-



Margie and Matt in 2008

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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