Giving Hope

“Who is this old man here with me?”

Those were the painful words Debbie Jones heard when her mother, Tish Smith, who was diagnosed with younger-onset Alzheimer’s disease at the age of 62, no longer recognized her own husband or the rest of her family.

“This disease threw us for a loop,” Debbie said. “The changes (in her) were difficult to watch. She stopped doing things she loved to do and would call us for help with recipes, even though she had always been a fabulous cook.”

Most troubling was when Tish, a charming Southern lady, went through an angry and aggressive stage and cursed for the first time in her life. “I didn’t know she even knew those words,” Debbie said.

As the disease progressed, Debbie’s father, Randolph, continued to act as Tish’s primary caregiver, and Debbie and her sisters took turns helping. Sadly, Randolph died before his beloved wife. “My father was a true story of a caregiver going first — he ignored his own cancer-related health problems,” Debbie said, “and it cost him his life.”

During her illness, Tish participated in a clinical trial by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) but had to drop out due to a reaction to the drug being tested. The experience introduced the family to Alzheimer’s research, inspiring their determination to help move knowledge forward.

“I promised my mom that I would never forget what this disease did to her and our family. I vowed to do everything I could to make a difference.”

Tish ultimately lost her battle with Alzheimer’s in 1999. Making good on the promise she made to her mother, Debbie and her husband Clay took action by getting involved with the Association. And after years of giving their time and resources to advance the cause, they wanted to do even more.

In 2014, Debbie and Clay pledged their support with a Zenith Society-level gift, directing a significant portion to the Association’s International Research Grant Program. They further leveraged their gift by participating in a national matching gift challenge. The 2014 Mother’s Day appeal featuring Debbie and Clay’s story raised nearly $2.5 million for the care, support and research efforts of the Association.

“Clay and I give to the Alzheimer’s Association because we’re excited about the support we can help offer families facing the disease today, and provide hope for all of us in the future,” Debbie said. “We’ll never beat this disease without investing in the people who are leading this fight. That’s why we encourage others to join us in supporting the Association.”

Debbie and Clay are passionate about doing their part to change the course of Alzheimer’s. “Only by joining together can we work toward developing more effective treatments, preventing Alzheimer’s and other dementias and, one day, finding a cure,” Debbie said.

In addition to donating to the cause, Debbie is a member of the Association’s national board and formerly served as director and chair of the East Central Iowa chapter. Heavily involved in public policy efforts, Debbie is also on the board of the Alzheimer’s Impact Movement (AIM), the Association’s sister organization that works in strategic partnership with the Association to make Alzheimer’s a national priority. As part of their Zenith Society commitment, Debbie and Clay also financially support AIM at a leadership level.

“As long as I’m able, I’m going to fight this fight,” Debbie said. “When you have an Alzheimer’s diagnosis in your family, you become part of a club you didn’t ask to join. Other people’s stories are what keep me going, and I really want people to know that they are not alone. We’re all in this together, and we can end this disease.”

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