

Living With Alzheimer's Disease

CAMDEN (May 19, 2004) – Robert Dreher, 86, of Camden has always considered himself to be a lucky man.

“Throughout my life, there have always been choices and somehow, I’ve always found myself on the lucky side of those choices,” he said. Even now the spirited man counts his blessings. Though his mind sometimes betrays him because of the effects of dementia, he is quick to say “I’m still lucky - because I’m still alive – with Alzheimer’s Disease.”

Dementia is a group of disorders in which progressive destruction of brain cells leads to a decline in memory, thinking, and reasoning. Symptoms typically begin with difficulty remembering new information, then progress to greater and greater disruption in memory, reasoning, judgment, and personality.

Mr. Dreher can call to mind many memories of his younger life like when he met his Irish war bride Ruby during World War II and the passion they shared for reading. Then there was the day he and a buddy walked into a bar in Bangor, Ireland, and they taunted a couple of the locals.

“We said we’re glad to see the Irish people willing to come out now that we’re here to protect them,” Mr. Dreher recalled. “They graciously ignored our taunts and welcomed us. Later we discovered two of them were heroic Royal Air Force pilots.”

After the war Mr. Dreher worked in a laboratory in Bath for more than 30 years in the histo-pathology department. He remembers the “best years of his life” when he and Ruby raised their two children, Robert and Robin.

It’s what happened yesterday that Mr. Dreher has a tough time remembering. For the last six or seven years, he has noticed that it’s getting increasingly more difficult to remember people’s names or retrieve a word that stays hidden just out of his mind’s reach.

“Sometimes I’m not even sure who I am,” he said. “I can’t connect with myself. I don’t know where I am or what I’m doing here. I’m like a stranger in a strange land. Sometimes I go to bed that way. If I’m lucky when I wake up I’m more myself again. The bewilderment comes and it goes.”

Mr. Dreher has a life-long thirst for knowledge and has read a lot about his disease. His own self-awareness led him to suspect that he had Alzheimer’s disease when he started to recognize patterns of forgetfulness. “Anger is another sign. I don’t really get angry at other people, but I’m constantly at war with myself. It drives me nuts not to be able to remember.”

He takes Aricept to help enhance his memory and thinking skills. Yet, what helps to keep him grounded in today are his memories of his younger life, his love of music and books and his daughter, Robin.

“Robin is a great help because she knows what I want to say,” Mr. Dreher said. “When I forget a word, she can help me fill in the blank so I can complete the thought. She’s very optimistic. That’s what I’ve always admired most about her.”

Though he doesn't tend to pick up new novels, he finds comfort rereading his favorites that he knows well. He also enjoys the clear and beautiful voice of Vera Lynn. Because she entertained service personnel during World War II, she was known as the "Forces Sweetheart," Mr. Dreher said.

Mr. Dreher was admitted to Rome Memorial Hospital's acute inpatient rehabilitation unit for physical and occupational therapy after he fell. He said it was very difficult for him to figure out how he was going to get back on his feet when he fell. He had to keep pushing his mind to come up with a solution. Then he remembered a place in the house where he could use two steps to help him get into a sitting position and then get up.

"Sometimes the simplest problems, even counting, can be difficult," he said. "I used to be a whiz bang at math. It's frustrating when I can't remember what comes after 16."

Mr. Dreher was pleased to share his personal experiences of living with Alzheimer's disease because he found that most of the literature focuses on the caregivers. "I've never read anything from the perspective of the person with the disease," he said.

In his search for information, Mr. Dreher found studies that suggest that keeping your mind active could help slow down the effects of Alzheimer's disease. And he's doing just that by continuing to read and listen to music.

"I don't try to plan ahead anymore," he said. "I just make the best of what comes my way."