



Judy Woodley takes a break on her stairs as her grandson, Noah Reid, 13, cleans up the kitchen after cooking dinner. Woodley was diagnosed with early onset dementia in February 2013. Though she has come to terms with the disease, she is most afraid of losing who she is and forgetting her family.

# Don't Let Me Forget

Photos and story by Hannah Yoon

Judy Woodley always thought the Alzheimer's patients she cared for as a nurse at Belleville General Hospital were a bit crazy. That was before she watched her own mother battle with the disease as it stripped her of herself, bit by bit.

Then, she received her own diagnosis. Doctors told the 65-year-old retiree that she had developed early onset dementia.

"I spent two and a half weeks doing nothing but crying. Just bawled my eyes out. 'Oh my God, I'm gonna die,'" remembers Woodley.

Self-pity, however, was short lived for the matriarch who cares for her husband, adult son and 13-year-old grandson.

"I sort of thought about it, and I thought, 'Well shit, I'm 65 you know, and that's not so bad. I'm on my way out. At least I know what I'm dying of,'" Woodley says as she reflects on the diagnosis from early this winter.

It was her family who first noticed Woodley's forgetfulness and her personality change.

"She was quick to anger. She didn't understand things she used to and forgot pretty easy," says Woodley's husband Gary. The couple have been married for 46 years.

Gary, now 70 years old, slouches in his chair from the aftermath of a stroke and age as he speaks about his wife's dementia.

She glances over at him with a melancholy gaze. It's difficult for her to hear how she's losing it but she knows it's her reality.

Dementia is an overarching term for a range of brain diseases. According to the Alzheimer Society of Canada, the main warning signs are confusion, gradual loss of basic skills, and a decline in memory, reasoning and communication skills.

"They have more trouble with their short-term and their long-term memory tends to be stronger," says Kristel Nicholas, the education and support coordinator of the Belleville-Hastings-Quinte Alzheimer Society.

Nicholas explains an easy way to divide up the brain into three simple layers.

The bottom is instinctive, followed by a middle layer that deals with emotions. The top layer is the part of the brain that is responsible for thinking and logic. This layer is most affected by dementia and Alzheimer's—and subsequently affects the lower two parts.

"When that's impaired, all we really have left is our emotions and instincts. And that's when you start to see a lot of personality behaviour changes because we can't expect people with Alzheimer's to use the logic and reasoning. All they have is what their brain is telling them is going on around them, which is based on emotion and instinct," explains Nicholas.

"The philosophy 'use it or lose it' is really important. And that people with dementia are given the opportunity to continue to do the things that they're able to do that we don't take over for them too soon," says Nicholas.

This disease is Woodley's enemy as it attempts to take away the most important aspects of her life.

"Don't let me forget my children. If I forget them, what good was I? A mother is always supposed to be there for her children," says Woodley, as tears well up in her eyes.

However, for Woodley, she hopes being a victim to it won't happen so fast. She keeps herself busy with church duties, jewelry-making, knitting and meeting friends.

Woodley will not disappear without a fight.



Woodley checks her fingers before she checks her blood levels for her diabetes.



Gary Woodley, 70, grabs a sweater from his wife, Judy, as she helps him clean his room.



A shadow of Woodley appears on her cupboard as she prepares breakfast for her family.



Woodley, right, lies in bed with her grandson, Noah Reid, as they watch TV together.