

February 19th, 2025

Chair Cwodziński and Members of the Education Policy Committee,

I am part of the community of millions who have had a family member impacted by Alzheimer's. That is why I strongly support Senate File 1355, which seeks to encourage education about Alzheimer's disease and dementia in school curricula. I sincerely hope that one day this kind of education will no longer be needed and by some miracle we can find a cure for this insidious disease.

Dealing with someone who is afflicted with Alzheimer's is something that you can't ever fully explain unless (God forbid until) you have experienced it personally. "Why don't you do this?" "Well, you should try..." "You just need to..." The [unsolicited] advice can be well-intended, but it can be impractical, if not impossible, when dealing with a loved one suffering from the cruel disease.

I walked alongside my great-aunt, Joyce, during her journey. She was never married and had no children, but she was like a mother to me, and she treated me like the daughter she never had.

Unbeknownst to us, in 2018, we embarked on the long, slow goodbye as her final journey began.

The doctor said that sometimes a significant, traumatic event can trigger a more rapid progression of the disease. The lightbulb went off and I thought back to she was diagnosed with colon cancer – which I'm so proud to say on her behalf that she successfully beat. From there, it was one thing after another: a car accident, her beloved kitty Freckles passed away, COVID and isolation, then her last surviving sibling Lois died, followed by her other kitty Charlie passing away.

At the time, we thought that her forgetfulness, which started out as benign, was a symptom of "chemo brain" from her cancer treatment and later isolation due to the pandemic.

However, as her actions and behavior became more severe, it became evident that there was something more serious and we finally got her diagnosis in October 2023 (unfortunately, by that time, it was too late, and she was not able to comprehend it). Never in a million years did I ever think that her diagnosis would be Alzheimer's, because there was no family history, and I thought forgetfulness was a part of aging, just exacerbated by her "chemo brain" and isolation. I wasn't familiar with the signs and symptoms.

The doctor told me the day she was diagnosed, "You will be as successful convincing her she has Alzheimer's now as you would be trying to convince me I am not sitting in this chair talking to you right now." That statement hit me like a ton of bricks and helped me begin to process how this awful disease works.

All that trauma and devastation likely caused the disease to progress faster. But through all of it, she took things in stride the best she could in her capacity. Her strength and resolve, even though she wasn't aware of what was actually happening, was admirable.

Of course, hindsight is 20/20, and I like many others asked, "why didn't I recognize this sooner? What could I have done better?" The list goes on. And the truth of the matter is that there is no silver bullet to recognizing early symptoms because, while all the same at their core, for each individual they materialize

differently in the beginning. The subtle changes are hard to detect at first. It isn't until it becomes too late in many cases that it you know something is drastically wrong, even without an official diagnosis.

Looking back, I feel that learning about the umbrella of dementia and Alzheimer's being a type of dementia would have been valuable. Upon my aunt's diagnosis, I found myself in a crash course trying to learn everything I could as quickly as possible to be able to take care of her. Those who have experienced this disease know all too well the delicate dance of preserving someone's independence and dignity while also knowing they are unable to help themselves and make decisions in their own best interests.

This bill will help students gain the knowledge to recognize symptoms in loved ones, engage in meaningful conversations about brain health, and contribute to a more informed and compassionate society. In its simplest form, this bill will help foster understanding why a loved one doesn't act like him/herself anymore. Knowledge is power, and in this case, it is also an essential tool in fighting stigma, promoting early intervention, and supporting families affected by these diseases. You never know: maybe a child learning about Alzheimer's will be inspired to pursue a career in medicine and find the cure.

Despite all the tears cried and the roller coaster of huge life changes, it was an absolute honor to walk alongside my aunt in her journey until she passed away in May 2024.

I know Auntie Joyce would have wanted to share her story to help others. As many others know, it can be a very long goodbye, and the Auntie Joyce of my cherished memories had long since passed. Life certainly turned the tables on us and reversed our roles in the most beautifully, twisted way, and as she was always the one to guide and help me, I had the honor to guide and help her until the end.

The lobbyist in me notes that this is not a requirement for schools to implement, but an encouragement. Alzheimer's doesn't discriminate, and while I always hope and pray that no one else has to endure the heartache, it is inevitable...for now. But the best thing we can do is position ourselves to recognize, understand, offer support, and above all have empathy to combat this wicked disease until a cure is found.

Respectfully submitted with the utmost compassion,

RaeAnna K. Lee

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Woodbury, MN