

Alzheimer's strikes close to home

By Tim Damos, News Republic | Posted: Thursday, September 2, 2010 3:30 am

Mark and JoEllen Waddell of Baraboo are thinking people.

As educators who enjoyed challenging their minds on a daily basis, they used to read the same books, attend plays together and engage in thought-provoking discussions.

That changed in 2006 when Mark, then a professor at UW-Baraboo/Sauk County and playwright with two masters degrees, noticed he was having trouble focusing.



"I just couldn't make sense of things as well as I used to," Mark said. "I went to the dean and said, 'I quit.'"

Mark had developed younger-onset Alzheimer's disease, a much rarer form of the disease that affects people before age 65. Mark was 56 when he was diagnosed.

The Waddells remain thinkers. But these days, they are a slowed-down version of their old selves. Their new challenge is to build structure into each day and take things at a more gradual pace to better cope with Mark's disease.

"Right now there's a lot of mental tasks that I can't do, and if I can do them, they are a lot more difficult," said Mark, who once was able to calculate his checking account balance in his head, but no longer reads.

JoEllen said after Mark's diagnosis she took a course in Baraboo called the Savvy Caregiver, one of many free programs and services provided by the non-profit Alzheimer's and Dementia Alliance of Wisconsin.

"We learned that everything has to be structured, and we learned to take it slow through each day and keep things calm," JoEllen said, adding that she has gained a wealth of knowledge about the disease through the Alliance. She said having a local organization to turn to for assistance has been - and will continue to be - invaluable.

The Waddells will join other Alliance supporters at Oschner Park in Baraboo on Sept. 25 for the 10th Annual Sauk County Alzheimer's Walk. As part of the event, teams of walkers raise money for the Alliance and awareness of Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia.

Alzheimer's, the most common form of dementia among older people, affects about 5.3 million Americans and about 110,000 Wisconsinites over 65, according to the Alzheimer's Association. In Wisconsin, that number is expected to grow to about 130,000 by 2025.

Carol Olson, the Alliance's outreach specialist for Sauk and Columbia counties, said that means her organization likely will see a growing demand for services in the coming years.

"Unlike a lot of organizations, we have feet on the ground locally," Olson said. "We spend most of our time working with individuals and families."

The Alliance provides support, education and consultations for families dealing with Alzheimer's, as well as professional training for caregivers who work with Alzheimer's patients.

All funds raised by the Alzheimer's walk are used for local programs, such as a toll-free help line, family meetings and support groups.

Last year the Alliance assisted 16,054 people in the 10-county area it serves, Olson said.

A cure could be 15 years away, she said, but researchers are getting better at diagnosing the disease earlier, and with more accuracy.

The push for a cure suffered a setback earlier this month when drugmaker Eli Lilly and Co. stopped development on an experimental Alzheimer's drug after learning it actually worsened patients' conditions and increased their risk of getting skin cancer.

Mark participated in research studies involving that drug conducted at the University of Wisconsin's Alzheimer's Disease Research Center in Madison. It's unclear whether he was negatively affected by the drug, the Waddells said.

But they like to remain optimistic.

"We're still in the game," Mark said.

"And we still love each other," JoEllen added.

Send e-mail to tdamos@capitalnewspapers.com