

Giving has always been a pillar of Carmen Holbrough's life.

As a United Church Minister, he was deeply involved in the community and fundraising for various causes. "Stewardship was always part of his style," his wife, Noreen, says.

That didn't stop with Carmen's Alzheimer's diagnosis in 2012.

From the beginning, Carmen has been open with friends and family about his diagnosis and what is to come. This has been at the core of his and Noreen's fundraising and awareness efforts for the Alzheimer Society of Oxford.

"Our whole purpose has been to advocate and educate, because the more people know about it, the better," Noreen says.

Carmen has nonfluent progressive aphasia, which means means he has faced a gradual decline of language. For a social person whose work was centred around speaking, there have been many challenging adjustments. Maintaining the same kind of social life the couple had before Carmen's diagnosis wasn't an option.

However, being involved with various Alzheimer Society programs has helped Carmen and Noreen adjust to the changes.

For instance, their support group gives them an opportunity to bond with people dealing with similar challenges. It didn't feel like the right fit early after Carmen's diagnosis, but now it's something they partake in regularly.

And although Carmen has difficulties with language, he can still sing. The intergenerational choir he and Noreen started in Oxford County through the Alzheimer Society is now going into its fourth or fifth year.

Some of the Alzheimer Society counsellors have been involved in the program. Noreen says they know everyone on a first-name basis, not just their own clients.

"They just seem very connected, as if it's all a big family, and I think that's very comforting to people."

Noreen has also been impressed with the Walk for Alzheimer's, which she and Carmen fundraise for and attend every year.

Their initial trepidation about participating, before they knew what it was all about, quickly dissipated.

"It's just a very pleasant event. We now look forward to it."

Noreen appreciates that the walk is very social and organized. She calls the work that goes into putting a fresh spin on it every year – such as last year’s silent auction – “tremendous.”

Noreen wants to see more people get involved in the Walk for Alzheimer’s. With more people being diagnosed, the demands on the organization are greater. At the bridge party Coffee Break fundraiser Noreen has held the past few years, she’s emphasized how much funding the Alzheimer Society needs versus how much is provided by the government.

“The big thing is there are so many more people [being diagnosed] each year,” she says. “I mean, unless more funding does come through to hire more counsellors and so on, we’ll be having trouble keeping up with what it is, because the statistics are astonishing.”

Noreen says Carmen’s language difficulties might change the way he fundraises for the walk – from petitioning curling and Kiwanis Club friends to more online fundraising – but they have every intention to keep working hard for the Alzheimer Society.

“I would say that we are very connected with it and very supportive of it.”

*Carmen, 79, lives in Ingersoll.*