

Some people celebrate turning 30 by splurging on a dream vacation or shopping for a new look. When Nikko Papadakos hit the milestone, her husband George threw her a surprise party with a charitable twist – instead of bringing gifts, guests made a donation to the Alzheimer Society.

With more than 100 attendees, they raised close to \$2,000.

This act of altruism is but one example of the Papadakos family's long-standing commitment to the Alzheimer Society of Oxford. They are avid volunteers and fundraisers, with strong ties to the Walk for Alzheimer's and the Tillsonburg Charity Duathlon.

"We volunteer whenever we can ... Whatever they've asked, we've always been more than willing to help," George says.

It's a personal cause for their family. Nikko's grandmother had Alzheimer's.

After her diagnosis, the whole family worked together to keep her at home also long as possible. They also turned to the Alzheimer Society for support.

Experiencing the challenge of being a caregiver first-hand inspired Nikko to get involved as a Volunteer Companion.

Nikko's generosity of spirit has deep roots, however. She began volunteering in the seventh grade and has been involved in the community since.

"I think you get as much as you give back," Nikko says. "It's important to have different experiences, and if you're able to give and share, then you should."

George and Nikko have tried to instill this philosophy in their children, Zan, 16, and Zoey, 14.

They've been doing the Walk for Alzheimer's as a family since the kids were babies. It gives them an opportunity to connect with people who have been affected by the disease. "I think it really just solidifies that yeah, we're doing right, this is where we need to be," George says.

If you ask Zan, they go for the donuts, George jokes. But they love doing the Walk as a family and won't miss it for anything.

George and Nikko's commitment to their community has clearly rubbed off on their kids. Zan helps coach his swim team, while Zoey has found a passion for fundraising.

This year, Zoey was named the Alzheimer Society's youngest Walker Wall of Fame member for raising more than \$5,000 for the Walk for Alzheimer's. "it makes me feel proud," she says. "I've been working really hard."

As soon as the donation forms come in, she starts picking up the phone and knocking on doors. While George brings pledge sheets to his restaurant, Corey's, Zoey is in charge of soliciting donations.

"I don't want to be the person that makes a big donation to get her there. I want her to do the legwork, because I think she'll appreciate it more if she does the work," he says.

George is certainly no stranger to pounding the pavement. He's organized the Duathlon for the past four years or so, bringing in between \$12,000 and \$14,000 for the Alzheimer Society.

Raising awareness about Alzheimer's has been as much a priority as fundraising for the family.

Nikko believes people generally have a limited understanding of Alzheimer's. "Education is key," she says.

She wants people to know that those who have been diagnosed are "still there" and able to contribute. They need support, along with the people who help care for them.

In the Papadakos family, everyone plays a role in helping out the Alzheimer Society, whether it's Zan donating his own money to his sister's fundraising campaign or George putting together a basket for the Walk's silent auction.

"I think volunteering and doing something that's selfless is important to how you grow up and how you perceive the world. It makes a big difference, in my opinion anyways," George says.

"I think the more we stop caring about ourselves and start caring about others, it's going to be a good day."

With this philosophy guiding them, the Papadakos family is helping make their community shine a little brighter every day.