

My life changed a year and a half ago when I received a definitive diagnosis of Early Onset Alzheimer's Disease. A lot has happened since then including the loss of something that defined my life--- my career as an airline captain.

So much has changed. Hearing the diagnosis took my breath away and I thought, took away my life. There are things I have difficulty with now, and some things I can no longer do. While it seems so much has been taken away, I have had my eyes opened to so many things that I had taken for granted. Perhaps the first and most important is that I have come to realize and appreciate the strength and depth of the love I have for my wife and children. But that is tempered by the guilt of my inability to be a breadwinner, and the knowledge that in a short time I will be a burden and eventually leave them far too soon.

Working with a financial planner to adjust our investments to account for my probable early death was a difficult and sobering task. It is not easy to face that eventuality, and in coming to grips with it, I have found myself with a desire to try to make some type of positive impact. In that regard, I have found a great deal of satisfaction in working to combat this disease through volunteering myself as a study and research volunteer at the Alzheimer Disease Research Center and working with the Alzheimer's Early Stage Advisory Group. I also find a great deal of enjoyment working with Meals On Wheels and other volunteer activities. My shortcomings are not so important in those venues, and I find the work very satisfying.

I have met so many wonderful people through the local Alzheimer's Association, the Alzheimer Disease Research Center and the Early Stage Advisory Group. Their council and support has enabled me to go through this process with an upbeat and positive frame of mind. Without their help, I don't know how I would have coped. Also, Gary Rotstein and Steve Mellon of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, in following us through these last several months have, through their questions and observations, helped to open my eyes to what I am still capable of and, for that, I thank them.

An early diagnosis is critical and the medical community, in providing that early diagnosis, gives us the opportunity to fight the disease with medical treatment and also gives us the time and opportunity to make the most of the time we have left.

I would like to tell the newly diagnosed and their families that while we have Alzheimer's, we do have years of active and productive living before this disease takes away our memories. Stay engaged, fight the disease with the help of your doctors, keep a sense of humor, and continue to live each day to it's fullest. You are not alone, and there are associations and groups ready and willing to help. With new drugs on the horizon, there is HOPE.

Sincerely,

Alan Romatowski

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alan J. Romatowski". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "A" and "R".