

## A Different Way of Looking at Alzheimer's

By Linda Childers

It's hard to imagine living in a future where you have no memories of the past. For the 5.3 million Americans living with Alzheimer's disease, the golden years lose some of their luster as they wage a daily battle against this progressive and fatal neurological condition.

According to the Alzheimer's Association, the number of people aged 65 and older with Alzheimer's disease is expected to reach 7.7 million by the year 2030. For these patients and their families, that means adapting to a new reality. While a lot of books have been written about how to treat Alzheimer's, few offer families insight on how to manage a loved one's condition. A new book, *Conversations with Ed: Waiting for Forgetfulness: Why Are We So Afraid of Alzheimer's?* (Elders Academy Press, 2009), by local aging experts Dr. Nader Shabahangi and Dr. Patrick Fox attempts to demystify Alzheimer's while also offering families a different perspective on their loved one's illness.

"Readers may be surprised and relieved to learn that the attitude of the person with Alzheimer's can be at odds with society's stereotypical fear of this condition," says Shabahangi, a licensed psychotherapist in San Francisco, founder of the Pacific Institute, and CEO of AgeSong, a family-run group of senior communities.

Over the course of six months, Shabahangi and Fox spoke with Ed Voris, a man who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease at the age of 73.

"Ed has learned to overcome his anger and frustration about forgetfulness and discovered he's been given a unique gift to learn what is really important in life, and who his true friends are," Shabahangi says. "Most patients with Alzheimer's are loving, caring people whom we can learn a lot from."

Shabahangi would like to see popular culture get past the labels of "diseased" and "cognitively impaired" when referring to Alzheimer's patients. "By changing our attitudes we can enhance the lives of our loved ones living with dementia," he says. "Being with a loved one who has dementia forces us to live in the moment and to be patient – timely lessons for all of us."

Rather than being seen as a burden and often abandoned by their family, Shabahangi hopes to see Alzheimer's patients viewed in a more positive light. He remembers meeting an elderly man with Alzheimer's who spent his day banging serving utensils on the table. His caregivers thought he was acting out and a candidate for medication. Yet when Shabahangi read the man's chart, he learned he had worked as a woodworker. "We gave him a wood block and a stick and he sat and chiseled away happy as a lark," Shabahangi says.

### Could It Be Alzheimer's?

Your mom begins to forget her car keys or forgets where she parked her car. Is she exhibiting early signs of Alzheimer's?

"There are several significant differences between age-related memory loss and Alzheimer's disease," says Dr. Steven Holtz, a neurologist at John Muir Medical Center in Walnut Creek. "Patients with Alzheimer's have memory loss that disrupts their daily lives, difficulty completing familiar tasks, dropping elements of self-care, and changes in their moods and personality."

Since depression and mild cognitive impairment can share some of the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease, Holtz recommends making a doctor's appointment to have your loved one evaluated if they are exhibiting signs of memory loss.

"If they are diagnosed with Alzheimer's, there are medications such as Aricept that can help slow the progression of symptoms," he says. "Research into the disease is moving at a rapid pace with scientists testing a number of medications that show the potential of stopping Alzheimer's or even preventing it altogether."

### Where to Get Help

A diagnosis of Alzheimer's can take a toll on a patient's entire family. Fortunately there are numerous resources in the Walnut Creek area that offer families support.

The Alzheimer's Association has offices in Lafayette and offers resources and support groups for families. Visit [www.alz.org](http://www.alz.org) or call (925)284-7942.

For more information on John Muir Senior Services, visit [www.johnmuirhealth.com/index.php/senior\\_services.html](http://www.johnmuirhealth.com/index.php/senior_services.html) or call (925)947-3300.

