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Aging gracefully: Local students demonstrate what caregivers can learn

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In approaching the care of a family member with memory impairment, we often think of adult children and elderly spouses as the key players in the caregiving journey. The often forgotten but very important players are the younger family members.

Teens may sit silently on the sidelines wondering what is really happening to Grandpa and yearning to be included in the journey. An important step on the caregiving path is reaching out to these younger family members to offer insight about memory impairment and its impact on the whole family.

Open, honest communication is the best course of action to answer their questions and help these young family members learn about the illness facing Grandpa. Trying to protect the teen by not sharing details about what will happen to him as the disease progresses simply puts everyone at a disadvantage.

A great first step is to include teens in activities with Grandpa. Older teens with driving privileges could be empowered to take him to the driving range. Not only does this give them the opportunity to spend time together, it allows Grandpa the chance to partake in a favorite hobby. While playing nine holes of golf may be overwhelming for Grandpa, hitting balls on the driving range can offer the activity at an appropriate level.

Including younger family members in the caregiving journey creates lasting memories and teaches life lessons about the value of life, health and family ties.

The stories high school seniors write in their applications for the Dubin Alzheimers Resource Center's scholarship program are full of inspiring lessons learned through their experiences in caring about an older family member with memory impairment. The emotions they face and the wisdom they gain from seeing someone close to them experience the stages of dementia are expressed as they share their thoughts in each story.

On May 29, the Dubin Alzheimer's Resource Center awarded scholarships to Damian Thorn-Hauswirth, 2008 Fort Myers High graduate, and Magen Wooley, 2008 Bishop Verot graduate. Each student wrote a touching narrative about his or her family's experiences caring for their grandmothers who had Alzheimer's disease.

In his narrative, Damian expressed "Despite all the pain and hardship involved with Alzheimer's, my situation taught me many things. I believe it helped shape me into the man I am today. Over the nine years I witnessed Nana's deterioration by Alzheimer's, I also saw something else. I saw unconditional love."

Magen shared her experience by writing, "I learned to appreciate life and the people in it for as long as

you can, because one day you may not remember it. My family being there to help my grandmother stand, to help my dad build a room to accommodate her, to wipe my mom's tears away or tell my brother that Grandma's not mad at him, he was just too loud, taught me that family is what matters."

These two young adults are great ambassadors for the cause of fighting Alzheimer's disease.

For additional information, contact the Dubin Alzheimer's Resource Center, a United Way agency, at (239) 437-3007.
