

'This disease is truly evil:' an Alzheimer's experience

Milton woman shares her father's story during Alzheimer's Awareness Month

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For more than a decade, the mind of Anne Murdock's father has been held hostage by a silent, degenerative captor.

As the days, weeks and months have rolled by, the Milton woman has watched her dad's condition deteriorate from mild disorientation to one where he no longer speaks, wears diapers and is barely able to feed himself.

That's how Alzheimer's disease operates, slowly robbing a person of their abilities and memory, much to their loved ones' dismay.

"This disease is truly evil, and it has no boundaries," said Murdock. "It's something I would never wish upon anyone."

January was Alzheimer's Awareness Month, and on the heels of this month-long observance, the local mother of two shared her family's experience coping with the devastating condition that's becoming increasingly common.

Murdock's father, Donald Woodbury, was diagnosed with Alzheimer's quite young, merely in his late 50s - the same condition that claimed his own father's life in his 90s.

Early symptoms began showing up when he was about 56 or 57 years old, said Murdock, but the big warning sign came one day

when her mother, Carol, received an alarming phone call from one of her husband's favourite lunch spots, the Mandarin.

"They said, 'Your husband is in the parking lot and he doesn't know the way home,'" recalled Murdock.

Carol cared for Woodbury at home for as long as she could, with Murdock helping out as much as possible, until he reached a point where he was becoming aggressive and needed physical help to get on the toilet.

After home care options didn't pan out as hoped, Woodbury's name was put on a long wait list for nursing home care, which he finally received three years ago.

It was at this point that Murdock found out she was expecting her second child.

"It was really hard being pregnant, going to spend time with my dad, working 40 hours a week in retail management and taking care of my older daughter," she said.

All the while, Murdock has also been wrestling with some very difficult emotions that come along with seeing her father suffer.

She recalls a time as a young girl when she and her dad were out yardsaling and they stopped by a rummage sale at a nursing home.

"He said, 'Anne, if I ever

get to that point, I don't want to continue on,'" she said. "I would almost like my dad to pass, only because I know for a fact he never would've wanted to live this way. This is such a hard disease; it's very emotionally draining."

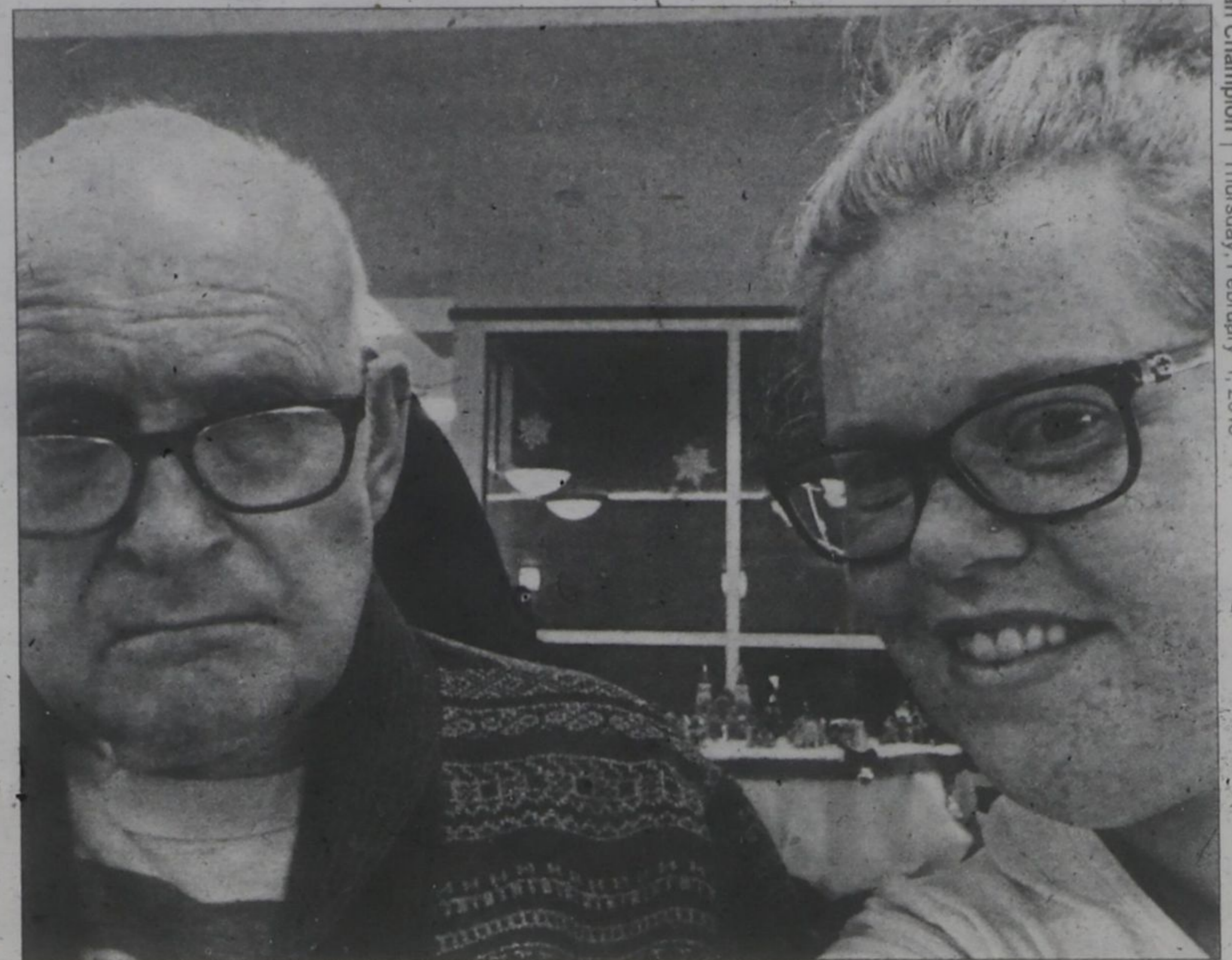
Now 76 years old, Woodbury has had Alzheimer's for more than 15 years. Murdock said she feels that he's reaching the last stages of the disease and may soon have to be put on an assisted eating program with pureed foods.

"We visit him and sit with him, but he can no longer speak," she said. "He still somewhat knows my mom and I, but I don't think he recognizes my children. You just need to have a lot of love and a lot of patience."

Through these challenging times, Murdock has turned to her husband and mother for support, along with Facebook groups dedicated to local families coping with Alzheimer's.

The fact that Alzheimer's can be hereditary weighs on Murdock's mind and has led her to proactively create her own memory books and do activities that "work out" her brain.

"You never know what's going to happen, so just be aware of yourself and your parents," she said. "Pay attention if you notice they're not remembering certain stories that they would



Anne Murdock photo

Milton resident Anne Murdock visits with her father Donald Woodbury, who suffers from Alzheimer's disease.

never forget."

Murdock isn't alone in her worries. According to survey results recently released by the Alzheimer Society of Hamilton Halton, 56 per cent of Canadians are worried about being affected by the disease. The greatest concerns are: being a burden to others, losing independence and the inability to recognize family and friends.

Today, over half a million Canadians have dementia, including Alzheimer's disease, says the society - a number that is expected to rise to more than 900,000 in less than 15

years.

To coincide with Alzheimer's Awareness Month, the organization has kicked off its new social awareness campaign entitled, 'I live with dementia. Let me help you understand' to spark conversations and encourage others to see dementia differently as stigma and negative attitudes on the topic persist.

"The public needs to know that having a diagnosis of dementia doesn't mean life is over," said Karen Robins, public education co-ordinator with the Alzheimer Society of Hamilton Halton.

- Memory loss affecting day-to-day abilities
- Difficulty performing familiar tasks
- Problems with language
- Disorientation in time and space
- Impaired judgment
- Problems with abstract thinking
- Misplacing things
- Changes in mood and behaviour
- Changes in personality
- Loss of initiative

"Yes, things will be different, but different doesn't have to be as scary as we think."

For more information visit ilivewithdementia.ca.

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