

**KAREN'S FLOWER SHOP**  
 Show you care,  
 Send flowers  
 487 Laurier Ave.,  
 878-2881  
 "Family owned for over 30 years"

# Champion COMMUNITY Page

## Facing Alzheimer's a trying experience

By IRENE GENTLE  
 The Champion

The fatal disease that corrodes both the mind and body of the afflicted crept quietly into Gail Czerwinski's life.

Growing up, her father George was strong and funny. An ex-military man, he conquered the insurance field with the same vigour he once tackled the Second World War.

And her mother, Betty, was the quintessential 1950s mom. She baked, sewed and knitted for her quintessential 1950s household, complete with mom, pop and two children, Gail and her sister, Lynn.

But those memories came under siege four years ago when Alzheimer's disease and dementia laid claim on not one, but both of Ms Czerwinski's parents.

"It was devastating," the Milton resident recalled.

Looking back, Ms Czerwinski can't say how long the couple were struggling with the disease that by last year had claimed both their lives.

But she credits the Victorian Order of Nurses -- which is now especially busy with Alzheimer's Awareness Month -- for pulling her through.

"I called them up. I briefly explained what was happening," said Ms Czerwinski. "The next day I was in their office pouring my heart out. I came home that day with all kinds of literature. I began going to support groups."

### Early signs missed

Early signs of trouble were likely missed, distance being the culprit.

George and Betty made their home in Montreal while Ms Czerwinski resides here, her sister in Kitchener.

Both were occupied with the happy encumbrances of growing families and careers. So it just made sense that most of the visits were made by their parents.

"But we started to notice their trips were becoming less and less frequent," said Ms Czerwinski.

And when the siblings took it upon themselves to investigate, it was obvious something was wrong.

"The house hadn't been kept up. Some of the food in the fridge was moldy," she said. "Laundry wasn't being done. They weren't wearing clean clothes. We were both shocked."



Photo by GRAHAM PAINE

Gail Czerwinski faced the trauma of Alzheimer's disease when both of her parents succumbed to dementia four years ago.

Neither parent was eating well. George, a lifelong smoker, had taken to sparking up his lighter and bringing it to his lips without a cigarette. So arrangements were made to bring the couple to a senior's residence in Kitchener.

"The house hadn't been kept up. Some of the food in the fridge was moldy. Laundry wasn't being done. They weren't wearing clean clothes. We were both shocked."

GAIL CZERWINSKI

They were befuddled, but accommodating.

"As far as my parents were concerned, they were both fine," said Ms Czerwinski.

But they weren't. A thorough assessment revealed that Betty was suffering from Alzheimer's. Gaping holes ripped through her short term, and then long term, memory. Her body, already frail with heart trouble and osteoporosis, was in the process of falling apart.

At the same time, George had succumbed to vascular dementia. His memory was largely unscathed but the ability to master tasks such as dressing eluded him.

And he had taken to hallucinating, watching out the window of his nursing home and commenting on the infantry below.

Spatial recognition was also affected. An attempt to sit on a chair would more often than not end up with George missing it completely.

As time passed, recognition ebbed with the couple's physical strength.

In Betty's case, "she didn't know we were her daughters," said Ms Czerwinski. "She'd sometimes refer to me as her sister or her mother or her aunt."

### Effects devastating

A 50th wedding anniversary party held two years ago resulted in a photo of the couple, all decked out and beaming gamely, he rugged and handsome, she egg-shell fragile, ethereally beautiful.

But the photo took more than an hour to snap, and neither had any idea what the celebration was about, said Ms Czerwinski.

When George died two years ago at the age of 78, Betty attended the funeral in a state of good-natured bewilderment.

"My sister and I were quite distraught but we had to keep explaining it to her," said Ms Czerwinski.

"We kept telling her over and over again, but finally we just gave up."

For the sufferers, that may be the mercy of the disease. Despite 50 years spent in matrimonial lock-step with George, the last year of Betty's life was not spent ravaged with grief.

"It just became a non-issue. She never once asked for him," said Ms Czerwinski. "It was just -- gone."

Instead, the tearing grief was reserved for the children.

To cope, Ms Czerwinski took a leave of absence, then another, from her teaching job. Now she volunteers her time at Allendale, and thinks about being strong enough to resume her career. And she still attends the VON's Alzheimer Support Group.

"It has been so helpful," she said. "It allows you to share your concerns. And it provides an excellent forum for problem-solving. You can get feedback from other people."

## Hard facts about Alzheimer's disease

January is Alzheimer's Awareness Month, but the disease is capturing the attention of more and more people throughout the entire year.

Today, there are 300,000 cases of the debilitating disease in Canada. And that's set to skyrocket as the population ages, said Melanie Harmon, program coordinator of the Victorian Order of Nurses

(VON) Alzheimer's Services. "Age is the greatest risk factor."

Money is being poured into research, but so far no cure or cause has been found. But there is help, Ms Harmon said. "There's a lot more things that can help a person with Alzheimer's. There are several medications now that are being used to slow the deterioration."

Aid is also out there for caregivers. The VON offers personal and family information and counselling. A support group meets the second and fourth Thursday of each month from 1 to 3 p.m. in the Community Room upstairs at Loblaws, 75 Nipissing Rd. And evening support groups meet in Oakville. For information, call the VON at 847-9559.

**COGECO**  
 CABLE SOLUTIONS

... taking you there

www.cogeco.ca

Acton  
 21 Main Street North,  
 Acton, ON L7J 1V9  
 519-853-1270, or 853-4700

### COGECO 14 Programming Schedule - January 25th, 2000 - January 31st, 2000

Tuesday, January 25th	Wednesday, January 26th	Thursday, January 27th	Sunday, January 30th	Monday, January 31st
10am, 11am, Noon Plugged In! Encore	10am, 11am, Noon Plugged In! Encore	10am, 11am, Noon Plugged In! Encore	4pm, 5pm, 6pm Plugged In! Week In Review	10am, 11am, Noon Plugged In! Encore
5:30, 6:30, 7:30pm Plugged In!	5:30, 6:30, 7:30pm Plugged In!	5:30, 6:30, 7:30pm Plugged In!	4:30pm The Local Scene	5:30, 6:30, 7:30pm Plugged In!
6:00pm Seniors Showcase	6:00pm Cable in the Classroom	6:00pm The Local Scene	5:30pm Seniors Showcase	6:00pm To Be Announced
7:00pm Money week	7:00pm Swap Talk - Live!	7:00pm The issue is..		7:00pm Living On the Edge
8:00pm Halton Hills Council Jan 17th	8:00pm 1999 Mis Acton Pageant	8:00pm Halton Region Council Jan 19th		8:00pm SportsZONE Live

Feature this week: Stuff to Buy/Sell/Trade? Swap Talk is your TV Garage Sale! - Wed. 7pm.