

## ‘We choose to focus on the positive’

**Humour, good friends and health care information help Waterloo couple navigate early-onset Alzheimer’s disease**



**Brian and Dianne Hanford with Bella** Brian and Dianne Hanford sit with their dog Bella in their Waterloo home. Brian, who is 66, has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease.

Record staff

WATERLOO — Twice a week, Brian Hanford climbs into a friend’s car to head for a game of hockey.

On a Thursday, he and his wife, Dianne, might go to a symphony pops concert with friends; Friday afternoons he enjoys coffee time with his buddies. And three times a day, Hanford, 66, walks around the neighbourhood with Bella, a much-loved black Labrador cross.

Dianne, good friends, relatives — and Bella — are like a compass that helps Hanford to navigate the day.

Two years ago, when he was 64, Hanford, a youthful-looking man with a quick smile, was diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's disease, also known as younger-onset Alzheimer's disease.

He was self-employed at the time, doing small renovation projects after spending more than 40 years in the construction industry.

As a worker, Hanford was known for his good memory. A customer had only to describe his house's colour scheme and Hanford would know which property he was talking about.

So it was “kind of a kick in the head” when he was told he had Alzheimer's disease, he says.

The notion that something might be wrong hit home about six years ago. The couple had lived in the same house for 31 years. But one day, “Brian was looking around and he said, ‘I don't know where I am,’ ” Dianne says.

There were other little incidents leading up to that, but they were things that were easier to dismiss, Hanford says.

Knowing that her husband's mother had been diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's disease at 58, Dianne made an appointment with their family doctor who referred Hanford to a doctor specializing in treating older adults.

Hanford was told then he had minor cognitive impairment, commonly known as MCI. They learned that some people with MCI may go on to develop dementia, but that others do not experience further decline.

“Then, it was a series of watching and going to the doctor every six months and doing memory tests,” Dianne says.

As it turned out, the tests did identify a steady decline and two years ago the doctor told Hanford he was in the early stages of younger-onset Alzheimer's disease.

Hanford says his first reaction was anger.

Dianne, 52, who works full time in sales with a supplier of voice and data communication systems, felt frustration.

“It was a blow,” she says. “It was something I knew could be coming, but you are never prepared.”

The couple credit the Alzheimer Society of Kitchener-Waterloo for teaching them about the disease and for helping them change the way they live with it.

“My regret is that I didn't contact the Alzheimer Society immediately,” Dianne says. “I thought I could handle it.”

Five months after her husband's diagnosis, Dianne joined a support group for caregivers of early-onset Alzheimer's disease.

And she and Brian both signed up for the Alzheimer Society's eight-week "Memory Fit" program. It provides opportunities to socialize, exercise and keep the brain active.

In one exercise, couples acted out some sketches they wrote, using a picture as guide.

"It was so much fun. It opened us up," Dianne says. "You're in a safe room and we did silly things we don't normally do."

They also took part in the society's Gather at the Gallery program, in which participants visit museums, galleries and art studios to make art and learn about it.

Dianne learned communication strategies — including how not to argue with someone who has Alzheimer's disease.

"That is what turned my life around," she says.

Armed with more information, more friends and more coping skills, the couple prepared themselves to take life one day at a time — something that wasn't easy at first for Dianne, a self-described "planner and Type-A personality."

"But it's a relief when you start to live that way," she says. "Some days are good and some aren't. There are no expectations. There's no master plan in our lives."

It helps, she believes, that they both have a well-developed sense of humour.

"Brian is a quick, dry wit. He'll come out with something and start to laugh," Dianne says. "When you learn and gain the tools . . . you know what to expect. We are laughing more than we have in years."

It will be a loss, Hanford says, when he can no longer offer a funny comeback to a situation.

"When I lose the quips and sarcasm and that stuff, I'll feel really bad then."

He and Dianne, however, are choosing not to dwell on what the future holds.

"It's not all rosy and I'm not Pollyanna," Dianne says. "We choose to focus on the positive."

A doctor has said that with help from medication Hanford may stay in the condition he's currently in for some time.

During the day, he reads, walks the dog and listens to music. Dianne is often away on day trips for her job, but works from home when she can.

The daily walks with Bella "keep my head fresh," Hanford says. "She's always entertaining, and people like dogs. I get engaged and talk to people.

"I liked it at first because most of the time I was meeting ladies," he says, laughing.

Friends check frequently to see if Hanford needs a ride to appointments, since he no longer drives.

The couple are committed to speaking openly about Alzheimer's disease.

“Brian and Dianne are a real inspiration and are always finding the silver lining,” says Cara Dowhaniuk, dementia support counsellor with the Alzheimer Society of Kitchener-Waterloo. “People open up when they're around.”

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### **Walk for Memories**

On Sunday, Jan. 29, **Brian and Dianne Hanford** will take part in the annual **Walk for Memories**, a major fundraiser for **Alzheimer Society** chapters across Ontario.

It will take place from 1 to 4 p.m. at the **Waterloo Memorial Recreation Complex**. Individuals and teams — including “Hanford's Hoofers” — will walk or skate, sponsored by supporters. Last year, the Hanfords' team raised \$1,500.

### **Other area Walk for Memories events on Jan. 29:**

- **Cambridge:** Cambridge Centre Mall: 6 p.m. to 8 p.m.;
- **Guelph:** Old Quebec Street Shoppes & Suites, 55 Wyndham

St. N.: 9 a.m. to noon;

- **Mount Forest:** Mount Forest & District Sports Complex, 850 Princess St.: 9 a.m. to noon.

See [www.walkformemories.ca](http://www.walkformemories.ca) to register and/or to sponsor a walker in any of the above events.