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*The Caregiver in Process: A Reflection*

My inspiration for writing *The Caregiver* was wanting to tell the unseen, untold stories of the caregivers of Alzheimer's patients. Alzheimer's is a disease that affects so many people, yet, the disease struggles to get the amount of funding for research it needs. I feel that the reason for that struggle is the stigma that is tied to Alzheimer's. Alzheimer's touches so many more lives than what meets the eye. So many people are not aware of how the disease progresses and the number of people it requires to care for someone with the Disease. I wrote this play in the hope that if people saw the wave of struggle that Alzheimer's creates, they would seek out more understanding of this disease, and perhaps it would begin to receive the attention it deserves. After all, 1 in 3 seniors die with Alzheimer's or a related dementia, so this disease is likely to touch every person in America at some point in their life.

Most people view this disease as one that affects only the elderly. People who have lived a "full, happy life." We never assume that this might come to someone who is under the age of 70. When we think of those who might care for someone with Alzheimer's, we think of nurses, doctors, and other paid positions. If we think of someone caring for their spouse with Alzheimer's, we think of the kind old lady who is retired and has kind, middle age children to help. Our mental picture never shows us a middle-aged newly-wed. But these unexpected imaginations are the reality I see. In 2014, my mother married the man of her dreams — the first

man who loved her the way she deserved. For the first time, she was excited about a financially sound future, in a new house she loved, with her loving, hardworking husband and her two teenage daughters. Then, in 2016, when she still had a full-time job, a new mortgage, and two growing children, her husband was diagnosed with Early-Onset Alzheimer's at age 56. From that moment, our lives were changed forever. We began a long journey of my stepfather's progression, my mother's struggles as a caregiver, and my sister's and my thrust into an unexpected type of independence.

After two years of this life, I had experienced and observed so many emotions: anger, frustration, sadness, worry, hope, joy, and love. With all those emotions welling up in me, and the number of times I felt that there was nothing I could do about what was going on, I turned to my art. I realized that theatre is a very powerful medium for raising awareness. I decided I would tell the untold stories in the form of a play. I felt that using my thesis experience to motivate my writing would be the best way to create a draft that I would be able to take on to new play festivals after my time at Western. Thus, the seed was planted.

The Fall 2018 semester was based in research and brainstorming. I did not know at that time what the play would end up being. I did not yet know what the story would be about, so I tried to experience as much as I could. I began to volunteer with the Alzheimer's Association, read books for caregivers, and read articles about the disease and the new research findings. A significant part of my journey and what became a turning point for the play was when I began to attend the caregiver's support group that my mother attends. I got to hear many stories of the everyday struggles and joys of caring for someone with Alzheimer's. I also was surprised by how much my mother and I shared about our unique situation during these meetings. The best part of hearing these stories was when I started to see the similarities in all of them. I realized in

these moments that the best story would be the one that was closest to me. I would not be doing anyone a disservice by writing a play inspired by my mom's story. Unique as it is, I realized that anyone would be able to understand and connect to it.

In the Spring 2019 semester, I began to write different scenes that drew upon my observations and experiences with my mother. The scenes were short memories of things that had happened over time. Slowly, after writing many scenes, and many thought-provoking thoughts from my advisor, the play began to take shape. The scenes started to complement each other in a way that made a heartfelt story. Soon, I had the first draft. Then, I began to experiment with the order of the scenes. I let go of the idea that it needed to be in chronological order. Once I started to jump back and forth in time, the play took on an even more thought-provoking nature. One that showed the confusion that this disease brings to everyone involved. A major challenge at this point in the process was writing something so close to me. It was interesting to figure out how to take real events and make them theatrical enough to be interesting to a reader/audience. I had to work hard to create dramatic action but keep the story realistic and grounded. I also struggled at times to make the character's intention clear to an outsider, since the emotions and intentions were so clear in my mind. In total, I wrote about five drafts before beginning the workshop phase.

Once I had what felt like a workable draft, I began to send the play to many trusted theatre artists for their feedback. I also took the draft into Steve Feffer's playwrighting workshop class where I was able to have the play read aloud for the first time. Hearing the play read aloud showed me many great things. It became apparent during the reading what was clear and what was not. I was pleased with the feedback that I was getting from people at this point. Most of the comments focused on the same things, which is always a good sign for a theatre artist. Having

many notes that are all across the board can be discouraging because it suggests that every part of your creation is somewhat unclear. I was happy to be receiving the same notes because that meant that many parts of the draft were working well, and I could see the concrete things that were not working well. I felt like I had lots of good notes from which to work.

After a few weeks of working with feedback, I felt that I had come to a good final draft. I had a small public concert reading where I got to hear the play read aloud by rehearsed actors. It was amazing to hear my words brought to life by actors. Although it is nerve racking to hear your play read aloud, I was delighted with how the reading went. Most of all, I was pleased with the number of students that attended the reading and how engaged they were when we had a talkback afterward. It was surreal to hear the students discussing and asking questions about my play in a way that I had experienced before when professional playwrights do developmental readings. It was clear to me in this feedback session that I had achieved my goals in writing something that was grounded, compelling, and raised awareness of the untold stories of caregivers. Reflecting on the discussion and the process, I feel a great sense of pride in the work I have done so far, and I am very excited for what is yet to come with this play.