

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?

As my husband and I continue to age, so do our friends.

Three couples in our circle of friends were formally diagnosed with some form of dementia. Statistically, this is not out of place. One in 11 people over the age of 65 has a dementia diagnosis, with a higher 1 in 3 people over the age of 80. These statistics are indeed high, but most people will say they don't know anyone with a diagnosis. *Denial.*

I'm privileged to be part of a not-for-profit organization called **Memory Lane Home Living Inc.** (<http://memorylanehomeliving.ca/>). We 'dream up,' create and coordinate numerous dementia initiatives. One such initiative, our weekly **Lunch & Hymn Sing** (<http://memorylanehomeliving.ca/events/>), brings caregivers and their loved ones together; helps them connect in community; and, in the long term, provides an opportunity for mutual support.

My inspiration came about while caring for **my mother** (<http://memorylanehomeliving.ca/history/>) during her dementia journey. It was lonely, and we felt shunned. When the journey ended, I wanted to be at the forefront of change in how dementia is understood and how people with dementia are treated. I didn't want others to experience what I had. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, I wanted to 'Be the change you wish to see in the world.' That's how 'Memory Lane' was born.

Three couples in our circle of friends announced their new journey into dementia with great sadness. The understanding I came away with was that they felt quite alone in this disease.

Two of the three couples have children our age, which prompted our initial connection. Two couples, the Rogers* and the Smiths, have husbands with dementia aged 62 and 71 respectively. The third couple, the Arlingtons, both aged 81, are like parents to us with the wife having a dementia diagnosis.

We met the Rogers at a university concert for our children. They were still in shock when, while caring for Helen's mother, Emily—who'd been diagnosed with dementia and had had a stroke—they learned that Helen's husband, John, was also diagnosed with dementia. *A double whammy.*

John was diagnosed with dementia shortly after they'd taken his mother-in-law, Emily, out of a retirement home and had set her up in an apartment with a caregiver. The family took turns relieving the live-in caregiver on weekends. It was a lonely existence for Emily.

For two members in one family to be diagnosed with dementia is inconvenient, to say the least. If there's one thing we know about dementia—a 101-year-old disease—being diagnosed with dementia, like cancer, is *never welcome or convenient.*

The Smiths phoned us after both their son and our son graduated from the twelfth grade to tell us the sad news. Jane's husband had had heart issues for the last 20 years and was on various medications. He'd had a pacemaker inserted, and it was after this procedure that it became obvious that something was wrong, and that John had suddenly cognitively declined.

The Arlingtons showed up at an event we were having in the community for caregivers and their loved ones with dementia. I was somewhat surprised, but full of gratitude, that they would share this recent diagnosis with us.

The amazing thing about each couple is that the partner with the diagnosis knows they have dementia.

It was Suzy Arlington who shared the defining moment when she knew something was wrong. She'd had those 'senior moments' involving misplaced keys or putting the wrong items in the fridge. Suzy's defining moment, however, happened on a return trip from Florida when the border agent asked her to sign some forms and *she couldn't remember how to sign her name*.

To think that a complete loss of memory occurs immediately after one is diagnosed with dementia is the farthest thing from the truth.

When we invited the Rogers and the Smiths to our home for dinner, we have, at different times and in different moments, felt their pain and sadness.

Recently, I talked to my husband about having a 'lunchtime dinner party' and inviting the three couples over together, to connect with each other. I phoned, let them know we were inviting them explaining that all the guests were on a dementia journey. Everyone agreed to come. I took out my formal china for this event and my husband worked the barbeque. Everyone arrived promptly at 1 o'clock in the afternoon.

Our initial conversation was small talk. It was over dessert, though, that each couple started sharing aspects of their dementia journey openly, pointing out initiatives they'd taken on this journey—what worked and what hadn't.

We spoke for *five hours* and connected through dementia journeys we'd experienced, past and present.

As I listened intently, I was in awe of how connected we were. Our conversation was intimate, comfortable and comforting. The party of eight did not get up from the table until six o'clock that evening. We had talked, shared and even laughed over the course of a five-hour period!

I know without a doubt these are the moments that allow us to *live well with dementia*, which also happens to be Memory Lane's philosophy.

It was one of the most pleasant dinner parties I have ever hosted. My husband and I walked away from the event feeling blessed, like 'our cup was overflowing.' I received a call the next day from the couples thanking me for the great time they'd had.

Dementia is about cognitive loss. However, it's up to us to determine *how* we process that loss. Being part of a community on this journey is so much more enjoyable. Why not make a difference and host a dinner party for your friends with dementia? You could use the hashtag, **#hostadinnerparty** when sharing on social media.

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*Names changed to protect identity.