Vintage Truth

After decades in this industry, I realize this is one of the most difficult columns I have ever written. Over the past few years my beautiful wife began noticing subtle changes in my personality and habits. Never one to harp, she dropped hints, left reminders, and watched with growing concern as my emotions fluctuated, my sleep patterns changed, and my forgetfulness skyrocketed. All of these behavioral changes began around the time I was let go from *Car and Driver*, so she chalked it up to minor depression, we talked to our doctor, and I was placed on an anti-depressant. I got worse. For over a year we went from specialist to specialist, seeking a diagnosis which would clearly explain my symptoms, I would take a pill, and life as we know it would continue. The problem with rose colored glasses is that they sometimes blind you to a reality you don't wish to face.

During the course of that year I was tested for a multitude of physical problems, including a stroke. I was diagnosed with sleep apnea and severe depression but the underlying problem remained elusive. One diagnosis kept being tossed around in hushed tones and sideway glances but since I was actively participating in the diagnostic process and recognized there was a problem, the doctors discounted what their instincts insisted was the most viable and damning option.

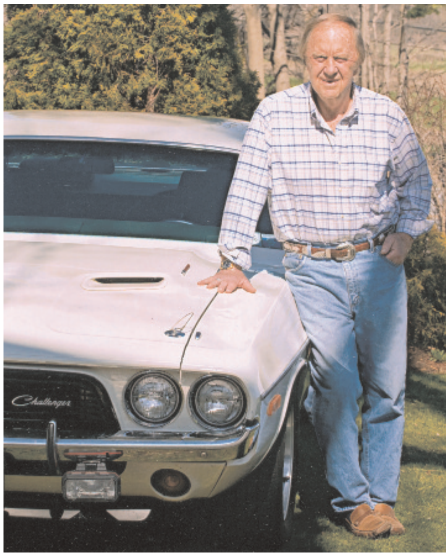
I have Alzheimer's disease.

Initially I embraced certain stages of grieving, wallowing in denial, anger, sadness, and fear—never quite gaining acceptance. Acceptance was tough when there were days I forgot I even had Alzheimer's. On those days, the disease was as new to me as the day I was diagnosed. The emotions so sharp, it hurt to breathe. Those were the toughest days, not just for me, but because Pamela was forced to retell the unthinkable—and pick up the pieces when I fell apart.

Alzheimer's was never on my radar. After my son died 16 years ago, cancer was the disease to fear and fight against. When Patti Davis wrote "The Long Goodbye" for her father, Ronald Reagan, I remember thinking what an inhumane end to an incredible life. Alzheimer's is such an ignoble disease—tearing pieces of you away until you no longer exist. Understanding that this is now my fate is daunting, but Pamela is a fighter who fought tirelessly to save our son—she will do no less for me.

In the ensuing months I have gained a certain level of acceptance, primarily because my wife and kids have insisted on a proactive approach to this disease. I am involved in the Gammaglobulin Alzheimer's Partnership (**gapstudy.com**) which is a phase III double blind clinical trial offered by Baxter Pharmaceuticals in partnership with the University of Rochester. Within the confines of this trial, I am given IGIV (immune globulin intravenous) twice a month in concert with traditional medication. IGIV contains anti-amyloid antibodies, which researchers surmise will defend the brain against beta amyloid plaque. This plaque is thought to cause nerve degeneration which may cause or hasten the onset of Alzheimer's disease.

As with any double blind study, some patients get the drug, some get a placebo. If the drug shows efficacy, we hope that Baxter will re-evaluate its stance and offer the Gammaglobulin to all members of this clinical trial.



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During the course of my treatment, I have come to recognize the extreme importance of clinical trials and the superior treatment I have received. In a clinical trial, all medical expenses are covered. Your physical and mental conditions are routinely monitored, and you are given top of the line medical care. We are not guinea pigs for this product, but the stars of the show, secure in the knowledge that the FDA has set up critical guidelines that are strictly adhered to in order to keep everyone safe.

For many of you, it may be hard to believe but I am an optimist by nature. Hopeful that the steps I now take will eventually save me. A small measure of reality intrudes from time to time and forces me to recognize that the cure may still be years off. This being the case, I fight not just for myself and Pamela, but for my children and grandchildren who are genetically linked, and as such, run the risk of facing this disease in their lifetimes. That is untenable, and if I can help move the research even slightly forward, my efforts are essential.

Writing remains my salvation, bringing peace in an internal world gone mad, but on those days when I find it hard to find the right words, sketching and photography help channel my intrinsic need to communicate.

Understanding that my work was never just a job but instead a vocation, my family has rallied, enabling me to continue doing what I love. My wife and I often tape our discussions so that my memories remain, while my daughter Stacy, who has been my editor for years, now helps to focus my thoughts, often cleaning up text which used to flow so easily from my typewriter.

Because of the insidiousness of this disease, I'm not sure of how much of myself I have already lost. My family is a better judge of daily changes in my behavior, but I am self-aware enough to know that changes have occurred and I struggle daily with the need to remain viable and recapture the man I was. I look at my wife and realize I am not ready for this ending. She is the love of my life and I never wanted this for her. These are the thoughts that plague me the most.

For my readers, I want you to know that I will continue to write for *Vintage Motorsport* for as long as I am able—often with help—but always with passion and my own memories. You have all allowed me to flourish in a career not many are blessed to have achieved and while it has been a great ride, I am not simply sitting on my laurels accepting this diagnosis, but doing everything medically possible to fight it. I am also moving forward creating memories for my family, including a Mediterranean cruise. Since this is a fairly informal column I would like to offer a final bit of advice—don't stop calling the people in your life who are facing a catastrophic illness. You may not know what to say, but just letting someone know you are thinking about them is priceless.