

HEALTH CARE



Top photo: Susan Aguglia (left) sits at the kitchen table as her daughter, Patty Dodge, washes dishes in the sink. Aguglia, 81, has been diagnosed as having Alzheimer's disease. Above, mother and daughter share a cup of coffee at Dodge's home on Sunday morning, July 14.

Family learns to cope with Alzheimer's

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

GREECE — Patty Dodge, who has taught kindergarten at No. 4 School in Rochester for almost three decades, is finding that life in the classroom is resembling life with her mother more and more.

Dodge's mother has Alzheimer's disease.

"There's so many things I say and do in the classroom that I find myself saying to my mother," said Dodge, a parishioner of St. John the Evangelist Church, 2400 Ridge Road W. "Her attention span is very short."

Susan Aguglia, Dodge's mother, suffers from such symptoms as memory loss, impairment of judgment, disorientation and loss of language skills. According to the Alzheimer's Association in Rochester, the disease kills 120,000 people each year. Alzheimer's ranks as the fourth leading cause of death in adults behind heart disease, cancer and stroke.

What causes Alzheimer's is still unknown, but scientists suspect such possible roots as a patient's genetic disposition; a slow virus or other infectious agents; toxins in the environment; or changes in a patient's immune system. No cure has been found.

Although the 81-year-old Aguglia, a native of Rochester, was diagnosed as

having Alzheimer's in March, 1989, experts stress that a person's brain tissue must be examined — usually during an autopsy — to confirm a patient has the disease. According to the Alzheimer's Association, 20 percent of all patients thought to have had Alzheimer's were found to have been afflicted with another disease after examination.

Dodge first began wondering if her mother had Alzheimer's when she noticed that Aguglia wasn't expressing herself as well as she normally could. Dodge's husband, Gary, speculated that the elderly woman simply felt pressured after caring for her own husband, who suffered a stroke in 1984 and who sustained significant neurological damage himself.

The Aguglias moved in with the Dodges later in 1984, and Aguglia's husband died in June, 1989. After her father's death, Patty Dodge realized that her mother probably had Alzheimer's disease for a number of months or years.

"I remember asking her one day, 'Do you miss Daddy,'" Dodge recalled. "And she said, 'Of course I do. He would help me when I got mixed up.'"

"He was helping her all along," Dodge said.

As the disease has progressed, the Dodges have found themselves spending more and more time tending to Aguglia's daily

needs. Ironically, her mother can no longer perform certain tasks for herself — such as getting dressed or bathing — yet she still sometimes recalls what streets to turn down to get somewhere, Dodge noted.

During the first couple of years following her diagnosis, Aguglia was still able to take care of herself, Dodge said, adding that she and her husband would often leave her mother alone in their home.

But Aguglia increasingly put herself in dangerous situations, or would leave the house and lose her way in the neighborhood, Dodge explained.

She remembered one incident in which her mother burned a pot of soup on the stove after turning on the gas and just leaving the room. In other instances, Aguglia has left water running without turning it off. She has also depended on the kindness of neighbors to direct her back to the Dodge's home.

The Dodges praised all their neighbors for looking out for Aguglia.

"They're guardian angels," Dodge said. She cited one woman, a professional hairdresser, who drops in occasionally to cut Aguglia's hair for free.

"It's neighbors like that make this kind of life different," Dodge said.

Nonetheless, as Aguglia's condition worsened, the Dodges — who are both full-time teachers — knew they would

eventually have to find the kind of daily care which they could not provide. Last spring, the Dodges found the answer to their prayers through an elderly day-care program called Home Connection at St. Ann's Home, 1500 Portland Ave. in Rochester.

Since the spring of 1990, the Home Connection has provided health and social services to elderly clients in need of limited care. Director Mary McCarthy said about half of the 55 clients in Home Connection have Alzheimer's disease.

McCarthy said Home Connection provides clients with a variety of activities designed to stimulate their minds, muscles and hearts. Music therapy, weight workouts, gardening and walking are among the activities featured at Home Connection, she said.

Patty Dodge credited Home Connection with rescuing her mother from a daily life of aimlessness.

"(Home Connection's staff) make a big deal out of things," Dodge said. "These were the things I wanted her to be involved with as opposed to sitting and watching TV eight hours a day."

Dodge said she chose Home Connection partly because St. Ann's is a Catholic institution and partly because other options — such as Rochester-area nursing homes —

Continued on page 18