

male caregivers on rise - chicagotribune.com

Doug Wyman will get up early Tuesday to make breakfast for his wife, Barbara: coffee, oatmeal and fresh fruit. He'll draw a bath and help her get dressed, then sit with her through her favorite morning TV shows.

Not because it's Valentine's Day. Because of love.

After 63 years of marriage, the couple had to develop their routine when Alzheimer's disease left Barbara unable to do things herself. But it's a routine that Doug Wyman — like a growing number of men who have assumed the role of caregiver in recent years — embraces proudly.

"She took care of me for 60-something years," said Wyman, 84, of Oak Park. "It's absolutely a pleasure to serve her now."

In the last 15 years, the number of men caring for loved ones with **Alzheimer's** or dementia has more than doubled, from 19 to 40 percent, according to the Alzheimer's Association. The trend corresponds to the higher number of women over the age of 65 in the U.S. with the disease — 3.4 million, compared with 1.8 million men. Those demographics have changed the tone of local support group meetings by adding a chorus of male perspectives.

It has also prompted an outpouring of new books, organizations and online resources for men learning how to be nurturers.

Experts attribute the increase in male caregivers to several societal changes, including evolving gender expectations as well as new life-expectancy rates.

"Men say, 'This is hard. It's challenging, I didn't realize we would ever be at this point, but I'm not giving up,'" said Edrena Harrison, a social worker and specialist for the National Caregiving Center, part of the San Francisco-based Family Caregiver Alliance.

The sentiment is shared by several Chicago-area husbands, who find themselves making spaghetti, separating laundry and coordinating doctor's appointments for the

first time as senior citizens. For these men, assuming their new role was never a question.

Bob and Patti Quas met on Rush Street in Chicago. He was sitting at a bar when Patti, a gorgeous blonde out celebrating her girlfriend's birthday, walked over to order drinks. They struck up a conversation that continued on to an ice cream parlor and then to the front seat of his 1965 Dodge Dart parked in a friend's driveway until dawn.

"We just gelled. We were birds of a feather — we got along and hit it off well," recalled Bob Quas, 62. "From that point on, we just built a relationship."

The couple married a year later, in 1970, had two children and built a career working side by side in his custom cabinetry business. She prepared delicious dinners — with her signature homemade baked goods for dessert.

Decades later, with their son and daughter grown, the couple retired. Patti began exhibiting strange behavior in their longtime Elmwood Park home. Once, she served tacos with raw meat straight out of the package. Another time, she poured cake batter into a plastic container and placed it in the oven. Her husband smelled it burning and ran in to clean it up, he said.

In 2010, doctors diagnosed her with frontotemporal dementia. She is now unable to drive, perform simple household tasks or follow and participate in conversations.

Since then, Bob Quas has sharpened his cooking skills, learning to make pork chops, steam vegetables and bake sweet potatoes. He took over the household duties and has grown used to guiding his wife through conversations with friends and family. He also joined a support group for caregivers of those with dementia to learn how to cope with and handle the new lifestyle.

He fears the day when she will need more help than he can provide and he will be forced to turn to Medicaid and other government assistance programs.

But for now, he said, he does what he can for his wife.

"It's a sense of duty," he said. "She has good days, and she has bad days. ... I just look forward to the good days."

His attitude underscores how men sometimes can be better positioned than women to serve as caregivers, said Julie Bach, an assistant professor of social work at **Dominican University** in River Forest, who runs a monthly support group for caregivers.

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Women often attempt to tackle caregiving alone, feeling guilty about the burden they place on others. Men, however, are more inclined to seek out help in the difficult process, Bach said.

"It doesn't mean that men are not having emotional reactions or they don't feel the loss," she said. "But their whole life is about moving forward and solving the problem. Women just want to vent, and guys just want to fix things."

Doug Wyman was certainly in that category. He desperately wanted to step in and help, but he recognized how difficult it would be taking over his wife's duties after she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's in 2005.

While he worked, she raised their nine children in a home kept spotless and stocked with all the family's needs.

But when she began going to the grocery and forgetting what she wanted to buy, or having trouble remembering the grandchildren's names, she knew it was time to begin training her husband.

"She worked me to death," Wyman recalled with a laugh. "She had me cleaning this and cleaning that. She saw dust that I couldn't see. And I had never, ever washed clothes."

Today, her Alzheimer's disease has progressed enough that the Wymans have hired extra help so Doug Wyman can still work a few hours each day in sales and marketing. He structures his time so that he can dress and feed his wife each morning.

At night, he prepares dinner and holds hands with her on the couch as they watch TV before he leads her to bed.

"When we got married, we said 'in sickness and in health,'" Doug Wyman said. "Our generation meant that when we said it."

Certainly there were male caregivers in earlier generations, but the number documented today is probably higher for several reasons, said Harrison, of the National Caregiver Center.

The size of the average family has become smaller, so leaving the caregiving to women is not always an option. There is also a greater geographic divide among family members today, sometimes putting children in other states far from aging parents.

And perhaps most notably, men are less hesitant to be known as something other than the breadwinner, Harrison said.

"Historically, men have always tried to help ... sometimes we've called them family Men or the good son or the loving spouse," Harrison said. "I think we're just seeing more men being willing to self-identify as caregivers now."

Herbert Lerner was a caregiver by profession, long before his wife's illness.

For 44 years, Drs. Herbert and Ruth Lerner ran a successful pediatric practice in Hyde Park.

The couple got married after meeting in medical school. They had three children.

In the mid-1990s, "Ruthie" retired when **macular degeneration** began to take her eyesight. Not long after, she began complaining or getting uncharacteristically angry about things.

Doctors diagnosed her with vascular dementia, in which the brain is deprived of nutrients and oxygen.

As his wife began to lose the ability to communicate or care for herself, Herbert Lerner dutifully cooked and fed her. He dressed her for the day and took her to the bathroom.

All the while, he said, he never stopped seeing her as the woman he fell in love with: a brilliant doctor, a tennis champion, a loving mother of their three children, a creative artist who filled their home with homemade chandeliers and other elaborate projects.