

## Alzheimer's robbed Barry Benness of longevity

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Jackie Hayes



One of the lifelong goals of Barry Benness, a highly respected Kitchener psychologist, was to live to 101 like his paternal grandfather. He had every reason to believe he would.

He was 6'4" tall, weighed 200 pounds, enjoyed running, working out and the combat of the hockey sports arena with players half his age. His idea of "junk food" was eating several apples a day.

Barry and Joy Greenleese, a social worker, were married in 1995 and maintained a close relationship with his daughter, Brianne, 22, who is studying architecture at the University of Michigan.

His dream of living to a ripe old age dissolved in July 2006 when he was officially diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's disease. Because he had sustained a brain injury in a fall a couple years earlier, he had to undergo many tests to ascertain that the problem was degenerative, not traumatic. Barry died last month at 58.

Despite learning disabilities in his youth, he had earned a PHD, could design and build furniture, and was highly intelligent, so he kept compensating to meet this new challenge. However, eventually, Barry had to give up his private practice and then his job as a psychologist at Lutherwood.

"If someone was in need, Barry would make the time to see them, regardless of their ability to pay their bills. He had a thick file of invoices never sent because he knew the clients couldn't afford to pay," said Joy.

Alzheimer's disease progresses more rapidly in people under 65.

"My husband left me without warning," said Joy. "He went involuntarily and in one of the cruellest ways possible. What do you do when life crashes around your ears and threatens to

drown you? I called K-W Alzheimer's Society, and thank goodness I did. Barry was soon involved in a group with early stages of the disease. Initially I was so overwhelmed that I was just focused on the basics of managing daily life."

Barry attended Sunnyside Home's community Alzheimer program and a support worker from Warm Embrace was hired but, eventually, Joy had to give up her job and then make the difficult decision last February to place him in long term care at Sunnyside. Although she has high praise for the treatment he received there, the move triggered a sharp decline in his health.

Joy said, "It is a brutal transition moving from partnering with the smartest guy I've ever known to essentially "parenting" a six-year-old. I learned the hard way to ask for and accept help. Alzheimer's is a hideous disease. It robs us of our loved ones, while they continue to breathe and struggle to maintain their connection with us."

She credits the local society for setting up a group of four working women, wives and mothers, dealing with early onset Alzheimer's.

"We were losing our partners way too early. This is not Grandma's Alzheimer's," Joy said.

Julie Wheeler, K-W Alzheimer's Society executive director, hopes the group will continue to meet and grow. (For more information call 519-742-1422.)

"Those living with early onset Alzheimer's (under age 65) may also be caring for children or aging parents, coping with loss of income and making arrangements for their own care.

The cumulative effect of all of these factors can be overwhelming. Meeting others who share similar challenges helps group members to regain some control of their lives," Julie said.

The K-W Alzheimer Society awarded Barry and Joy the Beacon of Hope Award this year for their contribution to its 2009 Walk for Memories. Their team raised the second highest amount, \$4,385, and Barry was second in the individual category (\$3,735).

Joy told Julie she presented the trophy to him at Sunnyside shortly before he died and how much it meant to him.

The 2010 Manulife Walk for Memories will take place Sunday, Jan. 31.

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