

The ongoing search, struggle; Alanson's Jack and Susan George continue wait for Alzheimer's diagnosis

Alanson's Jack and Susan George continue wait for Alzheimer's diagnosis

ALANSON — For years, Alzheimer's and dementia have drastically affected the lives of millions of families.

Odds are, you may know of someone living with Alzheimer's as it's estimated more than 5 million people are living with the disease in the United States right now. It's also the country's sixth leading cause of death.

It can also be very, very difficult to diagnose.

Take the George family from Alanson, who were previously featured in a Petoskey News-Review story back in June.



Seeking some closure, 61-year-old Jack George was hoping for a diagnosis of either Alzheimer's disease or frontotemporal degeneration in June after Jack's wife, Susan, began to notice behavioral changes and memory issues with her husband of more than 20 years.

A former special education teacher, Susan began keeping a detailed behavior log for Jack, who in March was forced to retire from his position as an environmental safety and health manager at Circuit Controls Corporation.

After contacting the neurological office at McLaren Northern Michigan, the Georges were scheduled to see a specialist some nine to 12 months later. They eventually found a neurologist in Traverse City who saw Jack earlier and signed him up for an MRI and neurology exam.

Unfortunately, the Georges didn't receive a diagnosis in June.

Recently, Jack George started clinical trials at the University of Michigan Health System for Alzheimer's and dementia research. Currently, there are 31 centers across the country which are studying, researching and performing similar testing procedures and MRIs.

"Now, I'm just a number," Jack deadpanned. "They started a research study which was a neuropsychology exam and to do some vision tracking and other studies. I've had another MRI and blood drawn.

"From where I'm sitting, it's do I have MCI (mild cognitive impairment) or not and for Susan it's what kind of dementia is it," Jack added. "We have different outlooks on what's going to happen. Either way, I'm willing to accept whatever they say and we'll go from there."

Jack said part of the trouble of being diagnosed is that to medical professionals, he's still considered high functioning, and his age, 61, is younger than when most are diagnosed with Alzheimer's or dementia at 65 and older.

Classic warning signs of Alzheimer's according to the Alzheimer's Association include:

- Memory loss that disrupts daily life
- Challenges in planning or solving problems, and difficulty completing familiar tasks at home, work or leisure
- Confusion with time or place
- Trouble understanding visual images and spatial relationships
- New problems with words in speaking or writing
- Misplacing things and losing the ability to retrace steps
- Decreased or poor judgment
- Withdrawal from work or social activities
- Changes in mood and personality

"I'm totally at a loss and I think every day we're getting closer, but you wake up one day and think it's the answer day yet that day gets further away," Jack said. "It's a moving target."

Susan George said there are 15 different tests which are recommended to diagnose dementia and out of the 15, Jack has completed 14.

"There's four more tests that could also be recommended and of those four he's had two," Susan said. "The two that are left are a spinal tap and an EEG (electroencephalogram). There's talk he might have to have that spinal tap."

Should Jack undergo a spinal tap, his concern is when the procedure will happen, how long it will take to ascertain the results and what his next step will be.

For the time being, Jack and Susan George have taken proactive approaches toward Alzheimer's and dementia awareness.

Jack has been asked to serve on the Alzheimer's Stage Dementia Policy Advisory board, and attended a "Walk to End Alzheimer's" Alzheimer's Association function in Traverse City. [There, he worked at an advocacy booth and was put in touch with movie producer Keith Famie, who is currently working on an Alzheimer's documentary series entitled "On the Front Lines of Alzheimer's & Dementia" for PBS.](#)

[Famie is hoping to feature Northern Michigan and Traverse City in the film and to share the Georges' struggle. "We'll be involved in the film which shows it's not an easy process of getting a diagnosis and what families have to go through," Susan said. "He \(Famie\) has a lot of different aspects. He's an award-winning filmmaker and he'll be here Nov. 4. A premier will be in Petoskey in the spring."](#)

As the Georges still await a diagnosis, Susan has noticed Jack also has symptoms of sundowning. Sundowning is a state of confusion that typically begins at dusk and extends into the evening hours. Challenging behaviors may include agitation, aggression, anxiety, fear, pacing and wandering.

"I've read 30 books related to Alzheimer's and have 15 more in waiting," Susan said. "Sure enough, the last book talks about storms and sundowners. Everything I'm seeing is being validated by the books.

I know what I'm looking at and I know what I'm seeing," Susan added. "I've looked over stuff on Lewy body (dementia). It's amazing what's out there, there's a hundred different dementias out there. They all cross over." The Alzheimer's Association estimates every 66 seconds someone in the United States develops the disease. In 2017, Alzheimer's will cost the nation \$259 billion.

Since the spring, Susan has taken a leave of absence from her job working for the Charlevoix-Emmet Intermediate School District as a bus driver. As it stands now, she doubts she'll go back.

"It's not a matter of if, it's a matter of when he might fall some day," Susan said. "Two basic everyday functions, driving to work and cooking, he can no longer do."

Despite that, Jack said he's able to step up his game when it's needed, and he's more cognitive in many social settings.

“I’d just like to know what it is so I can relax,” Jack said. “My mental condition is a little bit strainful and stressful and I’d say there’s a bit of depression not knowing.”

There is, however, one thing Jack George does know for certain.

“As long as I’m able to, I want to do what I can to invoke people to help so my children or grandchildren don’t have to go through with it.”