

## Why I Support Alzheimer's Research

I first heard about CART (Coins for Alzheimer's Research Trust) during a presentation at Rotary Zone 33/34 Institute in Destin Florida, in October of 2016. Maria and I were invited to attend this three-day event by then District Governor, Will Miller. This came during a time that I was having second thoughts about having submitted my name as a candidate for District Governor for the 2018-19 Rotary year. I was so hesitant about committing to the governorship that I actually wrote an email to the District Administrator, requesting that my name be withdrawn from the pool of candidates. Obviously, it is now apparent that my request was ignored, since I eventually attended the interview and was selected as the Governor Nominee Designate in November of 2016. I say all this because I want to share with you how powerful the CART presentation at the Zone Institute was for Maria and me, and how that day changed the course of our lives. That presentation made me realize the importance of my upcoming service as the District's future Governor.

Alzheimer's disease has been part of my life in different ways. My mother died of it, and so did my grandmother before her. Now my oldest sister has developed an advanced case of Parkinson's disease, which is also a very debilitating brain disorder. Almost everyone I talk to has a family member or a close friend with Alzheimer's or some other dementia. Many of you are familiar with the strain that dementia puts on the family members and caretakers of the patients. The saddest thing, in my opinion, is that the disease completely dehumanizes the person. First comes the memory loss and then more severe physical symptoms. The person with Alzheimer's disease changes so much that he or she seems to become a different person altogether.

As a police officer, I ran into many sad situations over the years. There was the case of the 95 year old lady who was driving the wrong way on an 8 lane expressway at 4 in the morning. Some of my fellow officers gave me a hard time after I arrested her. They thought it was a heartless thing to do, but I had no other good alternative. This lady had no family to come pick her up, and back in the mid 1980's, the best way to get her some help was to arrest her and bring her to the attention of the courts. There were no special programs for dementia patients, and I was not about to release her, or take her home, where she lived alone. So, I took her to the women's jail that night. It was a very sad thing, but it was the right thing to do.

Another sad story that comes to mind was the call of an 85 year old man who had wandered away from his home, where he lived with his daughter, son-in-law, and the entire Cuban family, with several teenage grandchildren. About ten minutes after I arrived in the area, I found the old man wandering in the neighborhood, several blocks away. He was confused and disoriented. I put him in the backseat cage of my police car and drove him back to his house. When I got there, the old man's daughter (a lady in her late 40's) led her father to his bedroom where I noticed there were two handcuffs chained to the frame of a metal bed. It was obvious to me that this family kept the old man handcuffed to his own bed to prevent him from wandering away. Apparently, this was not the first time that he had done it. When I saw the handcuffs, I was appalled by the thought of this old man being forcibly chained to his bed. At first, I considered taking action by charging his daughter and son-in-law with false imprisonment, but I then I put myself in the shoes of the family and decided against it. Instead, I wrote a report and referred the case for follow-up investigation.

There were many more sad stories, and then later on, my family had to deal with my grandmother's dementia, and then followed several years later by my mother's struggles with Alzheimer's. Now the

same lady that used to take care of my mother, lives with my oldest sister and takes care of her. This lady bathes, feeds, and does everything for my sister, who at this point of her Parkinson's disease, can barely walk or talk.

It is estimated that over 5 million people are afflicted by Alzheimer's disease, including one out of three seniors. In economic terms, it is estimated that dealing with the many forms of dementia will cost the nation over \$259 billion in the year 2017.

The CART fund started as a project of one Rotary club in South Carolina in 1996. It has grown to where over 1,500 Rotary clubs are now involved. The fund has awarded \$6.5 million dollars in 40 grants to 30 different US research institutions so far. The research has led to many advances that have improved how doctors make early diagnoses of the disease, long before the noticeable effects start happening. This is crucial because it is very difficult to treat or cure the disease in its advanced stages.

Our District was the last of the 8 Florida Districts to adopt the project. I have made it my personal goal as the District's Governor-elect to try to persuade all 47 clubs in our District to adopt the program. This is something that Maria and I believe in very strongly, and we will take the program to all 47 clubs, and hope that others will join us. Many already have. That's because so many of us have been deeply affected by this terrible disease. I hope that my home club – the Rotary Club of Inverness – will support this project.

Eloy Nuñez



A Project of the Rotary Clubs of North America