



Helen Mason

Healthy, thriving communities, Kia Momoho Te Hāpori Ōranga.

I still find it hard when I think of my wonderful mom Betty and her battle with dementia. Watching how she and the people around her coped with her dementia taught me a lot and affected me deeply. It's one of the reasons I was so happy to learn about the recent launch of the Dementia Friends initiative by Alzheimers NZ.

Dementia Friends is a new outreach and awareness programme open to anyone and everyone to learn about dementia, aimed at helping those living with it. Becoming a Dementia Friend takes just 20 minutes. I took my training last week. It's a tiny investment of time to learn some skills which could have a huge impact on dementia sufferers we either know already or who we may come into contact with in the future.

80% of people know or have known someone living with dementia. It affects almost every one of us to some degree or another.

My mum's dementia became evident when she was 82. She was the last member of her social group to drive. She'd be the one to pick up her buddies to go to the movies, have a coffee, play cards. When her eyesight deteriorated and she could no longer drive, that all fell away. The social cohesion she enjoyed so much went with it and her dementia became more evident.

When dealing with dementia sufferers you often find yourself repeating things which are then quickly forgotten again. People can get frustrated but it's not the person's fault they can't remember.

My nieces were incredibly patient with my mum and I loved their approach. They'd simply find different ways of saying the same thing. In a way I think this helped them cope too. If one said: "We're going out for morning tea" and there was no memory of that, instead of repeating it, or getting frustrated, they'd reframe it saying: "I was thinking we might pop out for morning tea today - what do you think?" It was a kind and compassionate way of doing things.

Living with dementia must be a frightening and confusing experience. When I worked in Aged Residential Care, a woman with dementia didn't remember that her husband had died, and asked repeatedly if he was coming to visit. Every time she learned the truth, she was learning that news afresh for the first time. It was devastating for her.

Of course it's not all sadness and we certainly had very happy times with my mum as well. In our family it's a Christmas tradition that, rather than buy everyone gifts, you're selected to buy one person a gift on behalf of the family. One Christmas I was nominated to buy for mom and got her a big carved wooden hippo. She was thrilled.

The carving was placed on the coffee table and every 30 mins or so throughout the rest of the day mum's eyes would alight on it and she'd say: "Oh he's lovely, who does he belong to?" When we said he was hers, she was delighted. "Oh wow! Who gave him to me?" At which point I'd say "I

did." And I'd get thanked all over again. It was a wonderful day. Mum got her present about 20 times and each time I got thanked enthusiastically, with big hugs. She was such a honey.

I would encourage everyone to become a Dementia Friend. It is a very simple process, takes just 20 minutes, and could make a huge difference to someone living with dementia. As a Dementia Friend you make a commitment to action to help those living with dementia to live well; choosing the action or actions you are comfortable with and able to offer.

Click on this link to find out more: <http://www.alzheimers.org.nz/get-involved/become-a-dementia-friend>



Becoming a Dementia Friend with Midlands DHBs Regional Dementia Nurse Advisor Ruth Thomas (centre) and Alzheimers Tauranga/WBOP General Manager Julie Sargisson (right).



My mum Betty lived with dementia towards the end of her life.

"If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion."

— Dalai Lama XIV (Born 6 July 1935)