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With a microphone, memories saved

Oral history project collects stories from those who have Alzheimer's

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Mary Ann Becklenberg and her daughter, Mary O'Donnell, have always enjoyed an unusually close bond, with few secrets between them.

But whatever intimate, unspoken feelings remained were aired recently at, of all places, a radio microphone.

The women were participants of StoryCorps, the largest national oral history project of its kind, sponsored by National Public Radio and the Library of Congress. The endeavor was in Chicago recently, capturing the experiences of average Americans, preserving them for future generations.

But this mission's purpose was to collect the stories of those with early memory loss, giving the recording session an even greater sense of poignancy and urgency.

"We are in uncharted waters here," said the 62-year-old Becklenberg, who was diagnosed in September 2006 with Alzheimer's. The session took place at [Northwestern University's](#) Cognitive Neurology and Alzheimer's Disease Center, one of five local sites.

The same week StoryCorps was in Chicago with its "Memory Loss Initiative," new research revealed Americans are developing Alzheimer's at an accelerated rate. One out of eight Baby Boomers is expected to struggle with the progressive brain disease.

At the leading edge of this demographic bulge is the vivacious Becklenberg. Her father also had early-onset dementia, which he called "the forgetties."

"I do feel a time crunch," acknowledged the Dyer, Ind., resident. "I know there's a hole in the bucket, and water is going out. . . . I just don't know how fast."

For 40 minutes, mother and daughter laid their hearts bare. What transpired was part confessional, part tutorial and part eulogy.



"You are the linchpin of this family," O'Donnell told her mom. "You are the role model of how I live my life . . . and that hasn't changed."

The daughter, the youngest of three, started with such conventional questions as, "Who were your biggest influences?" O'Donnell later waded into dicier territory.

"How did you know when it was the right time to start a family?" asked the 29-year-old, who married in 2005 and has no children. "I want you to be around . . . and for my kids to know how great you are."

"Then you better go home tonight and start doing it tonight," her mom shot back, with both women dissolving into giggles.

More soberly, she advised her daughter not to "overthink" this too much. "Look at your relationship. Can you laugh when life gets hard?"

Becklenberg, a social worker who has already beaten cancer, knows about confronting life's challenges. A couple of years ago, she noticed something was amiss. She'd get off the phone with a client and the conversation would totally evaporate. Or, she'd be in a familiar neighborhood, driving in circles, unable to locate the address.

The blankness only increased. In October 2006, she retired from Hospice of the Calumet Area and later started treatment at Northwestern, where she was the first to chronicle these seismic changes in front of the mike.

Since 2003, more than 30,000 people have documented their lives for StoryCorps, which has traveled to all 48 contiguous states. Snippets of selected interviews—about 1 percent—are played on NPR's "Morning Edition." One CD is given to the participants, and with their approval, another is archived in the Library of Congress. Some of the most captivating portraits have been compiled in a book called "Listening Is an Act of Love."

In 2006, the non-profit StoryCorps launched an initiative specifically for those affected by memory loss, encouraging them to celebrate their lives—to live in the moment but at the same time preserve their stories.

Becklenberg and O'Donnell embodied what StoryCorps founder Dave Isay called "the power, eloquence, grace and poetry in the words of everyday people."

The project spent five days in Chicago, traveling from an [Arlington Heights](#) adult day-care center to an Elmhurst support group. In total, some 27 folks—the youngest being 53—had their say. Through it all, Steven Thrasher, one of the StoryCorps' facilitators, witnessed extraordinary patience and kindness, along with humor and tears.

In 2006, Thrasher recorded his own mother six months before she died. He was hooked, applying for a job the following year. Since then, he has eavesdropped on some 300 storytellers. If he's learned anything, he said, "it doesn't matter how old you are . . . people never get over their parents."

With Becklenberg and O'Donnell, a graduate student at the [University of Chicago](#), he was unobtrusive, asking a few follow-up questions, but artfully steering the conversation beyond the superficial, envisioning himself as a descendant who might be listening to the story 100 years from now.

"You could tell that they didn't walk on eggshells about death," Thrasher said.

Still, it's not easy, Becklenberg confessed to her daughter. She didn't gloss over the grieving, the feeling cheated that she won't get to grow old with her husband. But she also said she hopes to use her remaining time wisely and gratefully.

"I want to love you best now because I know at the end, I won't be able to. I won't be the mother I want to be."

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