

By DONALD WILMOTT

Hello!

I'm an 88-year-old retired teacher---but there will be no exam at the end of this lecture. My life has been changing fast recently. Thanks to the Alzheimer Society, I'm finding good ways to keep up with those changes, and still to enjoy life.

Some time ago, I was parked in the lot just behind the PharmaPark Drugstore --- my front wheels against the sidewalk, and facing the road along the Salvation Army store. I started the engine with a roar, and instead of backing, the car lurched forward with a BANG, BANG as it bounced over the sidewalk, and down the other side. Because it was a new car, my first with automatic transmission, my wife and I put it down to inexperience.

Not long after, however, I hit the side of another car by accident. I was starting my engine in a parking lot where there was only one other car- quite far away. My car began moving toward that car. Instead of stepping on the brake, I pressed the accelerator, and rolled into the back of the other car--- presenting its bumper with several dents. And that's when I began to think of giving up driving.

I had been forgetting other things too.

So: to my doctor.

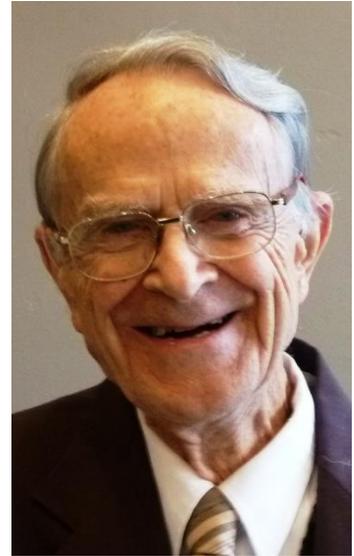
The diagnosis process included an MRI and a memory test. "Dementia." Ouch! It sounded terrible. Of course, the conclusion was that I should drive no longer. As a result, we eventually sold a beautiful big house under the escarpment, and bought a beautiful little house close to the Library, the Art Gallery, the Farmers Market and downtown. Now I can go almost anywhere I want, by walking out the front door. Even the Alzheimer Society is only two blocks away. Our new garden is smaller, easier for us to maintain, but also beautiful. When we finish organizing the basement, housekeeping will be easier too.

Now, the dementia. Names were the first memories to go. Within a year or so, I could not remember the names of most of our friends. The other day, it took me several minutes to remember the name of one of my grandchildren. And face recognition is going too. I have been forgetting where to find objects in the house, and what I should be doing. I never know what day it is, or the date (but I wear a watch which tells me both.)

SO I was sent to the Alzheimer Society, where my wife and I attended the four weekly sessions of its spring memory- problem meetings. There you get to know several other couples, in which partners take an active part in exploring their difficulties. The camaraderie, and the gentle suggestions and questions of the discussion leader, result in wide exploration of problems and solutions.

Almost immediately, I realized that I should quit hiding my forgetfulness and my non-recognition of friends.

When people whom I no longer recognize come up to me and start talking, I say: "I'm sorry. I have a bad memory loss. Please tell me your name, and how we have met." I may even have to ask when or where we have been together before. Their answers are always understanding and cheerful.



I also have a hearing problem. Failure to hear comments or requests clearly, and thus doing the wrong thing, can be depressing or frustrating. I can't avoid those feelings, but I find that I can soon "order" myself to cheer up and enjoy the present and future, without looking backward.

Keeping notebooks of names and addresses is important, but I haven't worked it out systematically yet. I am trying to remember names by attaching suggestive words to them. For instance, I keep forgetting Elly, head of my "Day Away" program, the only person there who never wears a name tag. Now I remember it by taking the first two letters of my father's signature: Leslie Earl. And Doreen is the volunteer who drives me to my Day Away every Friday: from DOOR to DOOR. I remember Helen McQuitty, as the friend who moved into Owen Sound when she QUIT running a motel in Chatsworth. I never know what day it is, or the date, but I now wear a watch which tells me both.

I have been asked: how can others support me? They already do, but it isn't easy for them. My wife has all the memory I need, and more: she can tell me the names of my distant relatives and their children, or of any place we've ever been. We've been working together on a project which has created the first museum in China that displays large photographs of the history of Old-China missionaries, and a joint project that will twin Owen Sound with a city in China near where I was born.

We hope to live the rest of our lives here. Saturday mornings, we are often at the Farmers Market, shopping for local foods or plants to grow. You may see us too, lunching with friends, or chatting with the proprietor, cook, or waiter in one of our favourite restaurants. Don is a member of the local Peace and Justice Group. Liz's art is in the collection of our local art museum. On Fridays Don goes to the Day Away recreation program for elders with disabilities at Lee Manor. He hopes he will soon be singing bass in a choir sponsored by the Alzheimer Society.

So I can assure you, that Owen Sound is the best place we have ever lived, in many ways. And it is doubtful that there will be any other place where we could have had such good health and dementia services.

Thank you.