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## Alzheimer's patients break theater's fourth wall

By John Tozzi

**Little appeared to separate the actors on stage at the Samuel Field Y in Little Neck last Thursday from the people in the audience - both groups, while maybe getting on in years, were clearly still active.**

They were distanced, however, by Alzheimer's disease. The people on stage were members of the Y's early stage memory loss support group. Many patients who suffer from Alzheimer's find themselves slowly and silently walled off from the world around them - both as their own memories lapse and as people in their life begin to treat them differently. The performance broke down those walls and brought the audience into the minds of Alzheimer's patients. The play, called "To Whom I May Concern," took the form of letters about the actors' own experiences. What emerged was a complicated picture of a disease widely misunderstood that still has a public stigma. And patients said that how other people react to their conditions is often as troubling or more than the symptoms.

In one section, May Ladman, a former teacher, read a fictional letter to a tour guide at a museum the group visited.

"We recalled how you spo-oke to-oo u-us so-oo slo-owly," she said. "Our memories are failing us, that's true, but that doesn't mean we're stupid."

Many described the embarrassment they felt about the disease, even as they cited statistics showing one in eight people over 65 has a dementia-related illness. Other letters talked about the difficulties that ordinary life presents those suffering from memory loss. Yellow sticky notes became like flares in the night: crucial signals to pay the phone bill, put out the garbage, take medication.

The actors struggled with the decision to stop driving and make themselves more dependent on caregivers to get around. Their missives switched between somber and wry. One, by Adele Robbins, began this way:

"Dear Access-a-Ride,

"Where are you? Why are you late? Why do we have to drive all over Queens to go two miles down the road?"

The very act of talking openly about the disease became a way to have power over it - to avoid being reduced to nothing beyond the symptoms of Alzheimer's.

"Just because it's a progressive disease, it's not an excuse to curl up in a corner and wait to die," said Milton Rothburd, a former high school biology teacher.

The letters, based on two months of interviews with members of the group, constructed narratives of people living full lives despite the losses that accompany Alzheimer's.

"This is a coming out of the closet or that room that you want to hide in," said Maureen Matthews, the founder and playwright of the project, which was presented by the Alzheimer's Association, Artists for Alzheimer's and sponsored by a grant from Johnson & Johnson.

"You start to become an it. People look past you, they don't treat you like a person," Matthews said.

In theater, that separation is called the fourth wall between the audience and the players on stage. But for the actors and audience, breaking that fourth wall and closing the distance between the two is what "To Whom I May Concern" is all about.

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