

Always a Gentleman and Gentle Man

The Reminiscent Power of Puzzles
by Melinda Dalgarn, Pieces of the Past

Dad was 76 years old in 2001 when he was diagnosed with Lewy Body Disease, a form of dementia. Mom, Dad, and our brother Chris lived in the Pacific Northwest. My twin sister Missy and I were 2,000 miles away.

Dad's behavior changed gradually over the next 15 years. Always outgoing and talkative, responses became single syllable words. Rarely did Dad initiate a conversation. He would sleep more and eat less. Having always taken pride in his personal appearance, Dad was less inclined to shower, shave, brush his teeth, or comb his hair.

There were times when Dad wandered. We were fortunate in that he always encountered helpful people...teenagers who recognized there was a problem and summoned help, EMTs who came to know Dad by name, neighbors who kept a watchful eye out, and even an alert bus driver who provided assistance. Once Dad traveled over 30 miles by bus and ferry to a dental appointment he thought he had on an island where Mom and Dad once lived. Missy and I were made aware of these events only after Dad was safely home but you can imagine how terrifying they were for Mom and Chris.

Mom developed the ability to enter Dad's world because increasingly he had difficulty being a part of ours. As his primary caregiver for fourteen years, she saw that he had his favorite big band CDs and provided him with old family photos, picture books of national parks and American landmarks, and old Christmas cards. They enjoyed picnics in city parks, drives through nearby neighborhoods, and occasional outings along country roads. Her life was on hold as she cared for Dad 24/7.

Missy and I called them twice a week, emailed daily, and sent cards and photos regularly. We searched for CDs and DVDs they would enjoy and made books that highlighted their lives.

As Dad's health deteriorated, we struggled to find an activity that would provide him with a sense of satisfaction and Mom with a helpful, diversionary tactic. We searched for something that was fun and meaningful. We also wanted to provide Dad with an opportunity to communicate and socialize with others.



What we found met those criteria...jigsaw puzzles made from family photos! The high quality 30-piece puzzles were perfect for Dad. Each puzzle is roughly 3.5 inches by 3.5 inches. They are easy to handle and Dad could work on them independently or with others. It was heart-warming to know there was an activity that he enjoyed...and that was helpful to Mom.

What we learned is that working on jigsaw puzzles is relaxing and provides social stimulation and conversation. They are a kind of reminiscence therapy that improves memory. Our challenge now is to spread the word about the power of puzzles. Since Dad's passing, we now, more than ever, treasure his puzzles. They are a tribute to him...always a gentleman and gentle man.

Please visit our [website](#) to learn the rest of our story.

