

WALKING WITH FAY

MY MOTHER'S UNCHARTED PATH INTO DEMENTIA

~ A MEMOIR ~

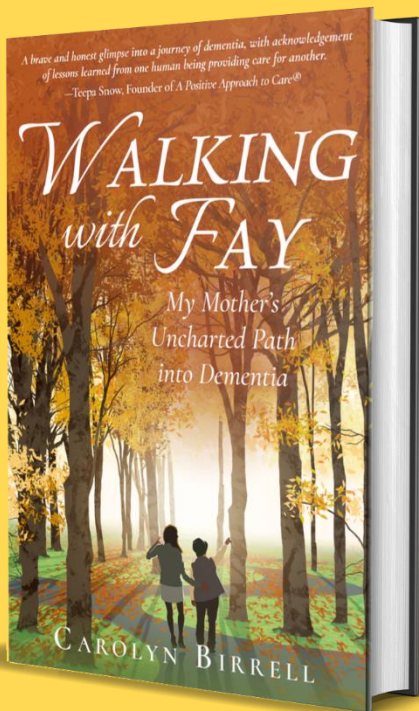
In 2012, Carolyn Birrell flew down to Georgia to kidnap her mother.

Fay had been living by herself since her husband's death in 2000 and clung fiercely to her independence. She went to church on Sundays, paid her bills on time, and volunteered at Vacation Bible School every summer. But at 79 years old, she'd begun showing escalating signs of early-stage dementia, each one making it harder for her daughter to discount as simple signs of aging.

After receiving calls from Fay's local sheriff and the Department of Family Services, Carolyn took action. She quickly came to understand the meaning of the adage, "When we make plans the Universe laughs," because hers required endless do-overs as she struggled to keep pace with her mother's ever-progressing disease.

This is a heartwarming story of a mother and her daughter as they navigate the twists and turns along the path into dementia. Filled with genuine, relatable, and often hilarious stories, this book is for those struggling to keep pace and always feeling one-step-behind as they live through the painful reality of their loved one's slow and tortuous farewell.

Your loved one may not force feed stuffed animals vanilla pudding or burn their neighbor's mail like Fay did, but if you're living through the sad realities of your loved one's slow and tortuous farewell, this book will help you find solace as you deal with it realistically and with a heart at peace.



DEBUT AUTHOR CAROLYN BIRRELL

Carolyn Birrell retired to Bonners Ferry, Idaho, after living in Atlanta, GA, for 20 years, where she worked for the American Cancer Society National Headquarters and then as a real estate agent and new home builder. She began caring for her aging mother shortly after her move and started chronicling her journey. What began as a written collection of her mother's difficult behaviors during dementia's earliest stages quickly turned into a comprehensive book that she continued to update until the inevitable end of her mother's disease. She now balances her time between the amazing Gem State and the Florida Gulf Coast, where you can usually find her on her paddle board, plucking strings on her ukulele, or pulling weeds. For more information, visit www.carolynbirrell.com. This is her first book.



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Local Author Debuts Mother/Daughter Dementia Memoir Released this
Mother's Day

BONNERS FERRY, IDAHO: Bonners Ferry resident Carolyn (Testa) Birrell celebrated the publication of her debut memoir, *WALKING WITH FAY – My Mother's Uncharted Path into Dementia* available this past Mother's Day, May 8, 2022. Find it on Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and anywhere you buy books and ebooks. Locally, it's available at the Bonners Ferry's bookstore, Bonners Books, at 208-267- 2622.

This heartwarming story of a mother and her daughter navigating the twists and turns along the path into dementia is filled with genuine, relatable, and often hilarious stories depicting the struggle to keep pace and always feeling one-step-behind in the caregiving role.

"This book is for those who've found themselves grappling with the indecision and guilt that often comes with caring for a loved one with dementia. It's meant to help them find solace as they deal with it realistically and with a heart at peace," Birrell says.

"My hope is that those struggling to keep pace like I once was will come away with helpful insights, a little encouragement, and maybe even permission to embrace the conflicting feelings that often come with the monumental task of loving someone with dementia."

Carolyn Birrell retired to Bonners Ferry, ID, in 2006, after living in Atlanta, GA, for 20 years, where she worked for the American Cancer Society National Headquarters and then as a real estate agent and new home builder. She began caring for her aging mother shortly after her move and started chronicling her journey. What began as a written collection of her mother's difficult behaviors during dementia's earliest stages quickly turned into a comprehensive book that she continued to update until the inevitable end of her mother's disease. She now balances her time between the amazing Gem State and the Florida Gulf Coast, where you can usually find her on her paddle board, plucking strings on her ukulele, or pulling weeds. For more information, visit www.carolynbirrell.com.

What people are saying about WALKING WITH FAY:

A brave and honest glimpse into a journey of dementia, with acknowledgement of lessons learned from one human being providing care for another. - Teepa Snow, Founder of A Positive Approach to Care®

"To take the heartbreaking topic of dementia and turn it into a helpful, uplifting book that not only leaves the reader feeling more "normal," but also encourages them to continue down the harrowing path they're on is not easy to do. Somehow, Carolyn has managed to accomplish just that by sharing her outlandish, sometimes hilarious stories using a genuine, relatable voice. This book carries the reader from the often-misunderstood early stages of dementia through to its inevitable end. I couldn't put this one down." Dr. Marty Becker, "America's Veterinarian," Author of 23 books (three New York Times bestsellers) and nationally syndicated columnist

"Carolyn Birrell's vividly told stories about caring for her mother Fay through the stages of dementia show us that we're not alone in our frustration, exhaustion, love, fear, and regret. Her book is both heartwarming and heartbreaking, as caregiving often is. Especially helpful is the Afterword, which distills years of hard-won lessons into real-life examples of how to better respond to the everyday situations that often cause conflict." – Connie Chow, Founder, DailyCaring.com

"Walking with Fay is a beautifully written mother/daughter Alzheimer's memoir and gem of a book for everyone. Carolyn's willingness to expose her deepest insecurities, fears and conflicts make this memoir a masterpiece in the human condition. Her ability to articulate the full spectrum of human emotion and frailty was thoroughly moving, as her transparency transported me into her life and pain in a way that is unforgettable. As a mental/brain health business owner, I commend Carolyn for her altruistic bravery in putting this together and for all the validation and support it has the potential to give to others. I highly recommend this book for anyone and plan on using it as a resource for my clients." - Cynthia Citron, MBA, LMHC, BCN, Owner, Reboot: Personal Breakthroughs Using Brain Science

*"This deeply touching and well-written memoir offers a wealth of insight and practical tips for anyone dealing with a loved one's dementia. Carolyn's candid recounting of her journey with her mother also injects humor into the heartbreak, adding a vital tool to every caregiver's coping toolbox—permission to admit their conflicting feelings without guilt. *Walking With Fay* is a moving, enlightening must-read for everyone, even for those not currently on this difficult path." - Willow Feller, Author of *Piety, Pride and a Cosy of Cures**

~ Author Questions & Answers ~

Q: What led you to write this book?

A: I started chronicling my “Fay Stories” soon after I moved her to Idaho, mostly because their impact on me was so brutal I needed an outlet for my shell shock. I began searching for books that might guide me through the cruel escalation of senile dementia’s stages, but I found mostly medical jargon and statistics. Where were the genuine stories that would confirm my actions were those of a rational person? Who would help me normalize my feelings of guilt, grief, and even anger as the mother I knew and loved vanished before me in slow motion? Where could I find practical advice on how to counteract the accusations of abuse she heaped on me? It was then that I realized my steadily growing collection of outlandish, sometimes hilarious, and often heartbreaking stories could be monumental in helping others searching for these same answers

Q: You called them "Fay Stories." Can you give us some examples?

A: Early on, they were simple things like constantly repeating herself and missing important dates, like her children's birthdays. But her paranoia grew as she swore a man was watching her house, followed by her conviction that someone was breaking in at night and rearranging things while she slept. While none of it sounded likely, how could I discount what she said? She *completely believed* her stories and was genuinely alarmed. Things continued to “go south” with incidents like climbing into people’s cars, stealing her neighbors’ mail, and even letting a man pitch a tent in her backyard. And with each new “Story,” I was left uncertain and ill-equipped to help her.

Q: When did you realize you needed to become more involved in your mother's care?

A: In the early stages before I realized she had dementia, my mother still sounded perfectly reasonable most of the time. She carried on conversations with strangers and seemed quite normal. Sometimes people looked at me as if *I* were being overly judgmental toward my mother's "quirkiness." She invented stories that were dreadful but sounded believable. She grocery shopped, drove a car, and cooked for herself. That’s how tricky dementia can be when it first becomes detectable. But when I started getting calls from her local sheriff and her local Department of Health and Human Services, I could no longer write off her changing behaviors as "the quirks of aging” and knew I had to act.

Q: How long have you been writing your story?

A: I've been writing it since I moved her to Idaho in 2012. Sometimes I filled chapters with her antics. Sometimes months would go by uneventfully and I wouldn't write - those were the times I kidded myself that her dementia wasn't going to advance any further and I was "out the other side." My final chapter was written in April, 2020, when she passed away - right in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Q: *The pandemic has affected untold numbers of people with loved ones in care facilities. How did it affect you with your mother?*

A: When I got the call that my mother had a stroke, they were just implementing quarantine procedures among staff and residents' families. No one really had a template to follow, so policies changed daily. I flew in from Florida after having been cancelled, rescheduled, and rerouted five or six times on a huge airplane that carried only a dozen people. Each of us had a similar story of harrowing flight changes and sprints through the airport. All felt lucky to be on the flight, and equally confused by what we had just experienced. It felt like a scene from the Twilight Zone. When I arrived, I was allowed to see her, then told I couldn't come back - twice. The second time, I refused to leave her room, and was lucky to be with her when she died. I've heard so many heartbreaking stories from people who weren't so lucky and didn't get to be with their loved one during that time.

Q: *Do you have a background in writing?*

A: I've worked as a Medical Assistant in OB/GYN, in PR and Human Resources for the American Cancer Society, and as a realtor and new home builder. English was my favorite class in school and I'm an avid reader, but that's the extent of my background in writing.

Q: *What can readers expect from this book?*

A: I've had many eyes on it since I typed "The End," and each pair has come away with something different. I found that fascinating! Some have sworn they needed this book at exactly the time they read it - they were going through some aspect of something in the book with a loved one that hit the mark for them. Others admitted they didn't think they had any business or interest in reading it because they had no one in their lives with dementia. But they were shocked to come away with a "new attitude" toward someone they knew, along with a renewed conviction to change their current approach toward them. For me, if I can help one person adjust the way they view - feel, really - about their loved one during such a difficult time, just maybe I can help allay the potential guilt they may suffer from wishing they'd done things differently while they still could.

Q: *What do you say to people who respond with, "But I tried that already. My situation is different."*

A: I say, "You're right. Every situation is different. But they're all similar enough to find help for you." Whether it's an online caregiving page, or the Alzheimer's Association, or one of the many books now out there, my best advice is don't stop looking until you've found what speaks to you. And when you've found that one thing, get ready to change again, because that's the nature of dementia - you're always trying to keep up.

Q: *What makes your story so unique from the other Memoirs out there?*

A: Since beginning my search in 2012 for books I connected with, many more have been written. Mine isn't the be-all-and-end-all story, for sure. What mine is, though, is a helpful, validating, encouraging story written by an every-day person with an every-day loved one who happens to have dementia. My book is meant for those who are drowning like I was - the sons, daughters, and loved ones who find themselves dealing with this sneaky, debilitating disease that not only robs the person we love of their mental faculties, but effectively changes them into someone we struggle to recognize, let alone like. It's for readers who are living through the sad reality of this slow and tortuous farewell and need to find solace as they deal with it realistically and with a heart at peace.

Q: *Is there one thing you hope your readers will take away from reading your book?*

A: There are several things, really. It depends on the reader and where they are on their journey. I hope they leave feeling more able to forgive their conflicting feelings of guilt, remorse, and even anger toward their loved one. I hope they leave feeling more committed to finding the humor and love in their new-found caregiving responsibilities. And I especially hope they leave feeling a little more at peace with this new world they've found themselves living in, knowing they're not alone, and that there's help in many forms out there – they just need to look for it.

Dementia Statistics:

The World Health Organization (WHO) reports the total number of people throughout the world living with dementia is currently 50 million and is projected to reach 82 million in 2030, and 152 million in 2050. That means an even higher number of family members and caregivers are dealing with some cruel stage of their loved one's disease.

Millions of Americans are living with Alzheimer's or other dementias. As the size of the U.S. population age 65 and older continues to increase, the number of Americans with Alzheimer's or other dementias will grow. Both the number and proportion will escalate rapidly in coming years, as the population of Americans aged 65 and older is projected to grow from 58 million in 2021 to 88 million by 2050. The baby-boom generation (Americans born between 1946 and 1964) has already begun to reach age 65 and beyond, the age range of greatest risk of Alzheimer's dementia; in fact, the oldest members of the baby-boom generation turn age 75 in 2021. (Alzheimer's Association 2021 Facts and Figures)

An estimated 6.2 million Americans aged 65 and older are living with Alzheimer's dementia in 2021. Seventy-two percent of them are age 75 or older. Of the total U.S. population:

- More than 1 in 9 people (11.3%) age 65 and older has Alzheimer's dementia.
- The percentage of people with Alzheimer's dementia increases dramatically with age: 5.3% of people aged 65 to 74, 13.8% of people aged 75 to 84 and 34.6% of people aged 85 or older have Alzheimer's dementia, according to the Alzheimer's Association 2021 Facts and Figures report. The aging of the baby boom generation will significantly increase the number of people in the United States with Alzheimer's.

Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia? Many people wonder what the difference is between Alzheimer's disease and dementia. According to the Alzheimer's Association 2021 Facts and Figures report, Dementia is an overall term for a particular group of symptoms. The characteristic symptoms of dementia are difficulties with memory, language, problem-solving and other thinking skills that affect a person's ability to perform everyday activities. Dementia has many causes. Alzheimer's disease is the most common cause of dementia.