

Another way to give back

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– **Jordyn Noennig**, Special to The Freeman

WAUKESHA — A local family strongly versed in giving back to the community did not think twice when the opportunity to donate their father's brain to Alzheimer's research was presented to them.

John Melster, whom the family describes as a community activist, spent much of his lifetime fundraising for Carroll University, serving on boards, working with Boy Scouts and delivering meals to the disabled before passing away in March at the age of 93.

Giving his brain to research Alzheimer's, the disease that affected his final years, became the final gift Melster would give.

"It seemed to work for our family because we always gave to the community," said Cathy Bellovary, daughter of Melster, "and this was just another way."

Bellovary first thought of donating her father's brain after working 16 years at the Waukesha County Aging and Disability Resource Center, where she helped seniors with a variety of health and disability problems.

She was grateful she had experience and knowledge in helping elders cope with developing dementia, but still found her father's case a difficult journey.

"It was actually much easier to help other people deal with losing someone to Alzheimer's than your own family in the same situation," Bellovary said.

The family found comfort with their call to the Alzheimer's Association to learn how to donate to the Wisconsin Brain Donor Program.

"I talked to the director of the Alzheimer's Association," said Bellovary, "and I was impressed with the conversation and what they told me about the donation process."

The Wisconsin Brain Donor Program at the Alzheimer's Disease Research Center in Madison has collected brains for research for more than 20 years and have accumulated over 300.

The Wisconsin Brain Donor Program was originally not specific to dementia research until it received a federal grant a few years ago and took a new focus.

Program members have since paired with the ADRC to create a project where they not only dissect brains, but record data and test scores of adults prone to Alzheimer's based on genetics or those developing mental problems.

About 600 are signed up for the new program so far, and almost 70 percent have agreed to donate their brains after death.

Bellovary said she may join the clinical trial to monitor herself in case she begins developing the disease, and to help the cause of research.

“You don’t anticipate these things, but I am certainly considering joining the clinical trial now,” she said.

Jay Fruehling, senior research specialist and manager at the Wisconsin Brain Donor Program, encourages those losing their parents to Alzheimer’s to donate, or join the program to help find a cure.

The actual brain removals are done by a board certified pathologist and take about an hour. The procedure does not affect any funeral arrangements, including having an open casket.

Fruehling said researchers were hoping to have a cure by now, but the brain is so complex and unknown it has been hard to pinpoint a treatment.

“The research is very complicated, and takes a lot of baby steps,” said Fruehling.

To help fund Alzheimer’s studies and treatment for families dealing with dementia, the Alzheimer’s Association holds annual fundraising events, including the Walk to End Alzheimer’s this Saturday in Frame Park.

The walk began in Waukesha County in 2010 and has raised over \$400,000 to help support the over 8,500 individuals with Alzheimer’s in the county alone.

The association already has reached this year’s goal to raise \$120,000, according to Bellovary, who is on the board for the walk this year.

The board members anticipate more donations and participants on the day of the walk, with registration beginning at 8:30 a.m.

“I’m very excited to walk this weekend; we’ve raised more than ever before,” Bellovary said. “Plus we joke that my father used to be in charge of the weather for this event, so hopefully he brings us some sunshine this weekend too.”

For more information on the Wisconsin Brain Donor Program, call 608-256-1901 or email brainbank@medicine.wisc.edu.

For more information on the Walk to End Alzheimer’s, go to alz.org/walk.