

## Alaskan's share memorable moments of care

Taking care of a parent or aging family member is part of daily life for thousands of Alaskans; it is a task that poses great challenges but also rewards those who accept the challenges with many memorable moments. In a writing contest held by the Alzheimer's Resource of Alaska, Alaskans were given the opportunity to share some of their most memorable moments while caring for loved ones.

Dozens of entries were received from across the state with winners in five age categories and one grand prize winner of 40,000 Alaska Airline miles. The grand prize winning entry was entitled "Pebbles" and was written by Jane Wiebe. This is her story...

### PEBBLES

I keep the memories of Mom's early Alzheimer's years in my pocket, smooth river pebbles that roll against each other, translucent. If you hold them to the sky, light comes through.

Here's one, from when Mom was just beginning to sweetly lose her mind:

*Mom and Dad have come to visit in Alaska. It's September, harvest-time. Picking stems from gooseberries and slicing apples to freeze for pie filling are good activities for her. She doesn't have to wonder what she should be doing, because the bowl in front of her reminds her every instant. It's soothing, for both of us, to have her safely occupied.*

*So we bake some gooseberry-apple crisp, and enjoy it with vanilla cream for dessert. Later in the evening, she wanders past the half-eaten pan of crisp.*

*"I haven't tasted this. I'd like to try it."*

*"Sure, Mom, you should have some, especially since you did all the work, getting the stems off those gooseberries."*

*"I did? Oh. Well. I didn't have anything else I needed to do," she says, and scoops a bit onto a plate. "I think it would be better warmed up a little." She lifts her plate into the microwave, closes the door, and turns it on.*

*I'm preoccupied with my dad, not paying attention. Ten minutes later, Mom wanders by the gooseberry-apple crisp again. "I haven't had a chance to taste this dessert. I'd like to try some."*

*What's another little bit of dessert. "Sure Mom, you should try it."*

*"I think it would be better if I warm it up a little." She spoons a small section onto a plate, opens the microwave door, then pauses upon spotting the plate of crisp inside. She takes it out and extends it to me. "Is this yours?"*

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Conversations with Mom reminded me of a bird expert who once described bird calls as little messages saying: “Here I am, where are you?” He claimed much of our conversation does the same thing. Mom and I would pick raspberries for an hour and the same topics circled round.

Sometimes she knew I had a son named Miles, and would ask how he got to school. Other times she would say, “I’ve forgotten, how many children do you have?” I asked her once how many children she had, and she said, “Oh, about 5 off the top of my head. And 15 grandchildren.” Why get hung up on details? So what if she really only had 3 children and 6 grandchildren? We were joined in conversation. She hung on to the rhythm of conversation even after reasonable responses eluded her. She knew when it was her turn, and what inflections would work.

Here are a few more pebbles, from a year or two or three later, during visits to Mom and Dad in Arizona, where they went to escape the South Dakota winters. They lived in a park-model, a mini-trailer house, alongside hundreds of other mid-westerners.

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*We're leaving a building at night, under streetlights. Mom pauses at the curb, spots a white parking line painted on the pavement and walks along the curb to get to it. She steps off the curb onto the white line and tight-rope walks down the line until it ends. She stands stranded. I offer her my hand, she takes it, tests the black pavement with her toe, then steps trustingly off into her abyss.*

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*She's brushing her teeth and I'm watching. “Hey, Mom, you didn't brush the backs.”*

*“Hmmm?” She looks at me, puzzled.*

*“The backs of your teeth. The back side.” I point at mine.*

*She looks at me like I am crazy. “Well...okay...” she says dubiously, and raises her toothbrush up to her eye. She's aiming to get at the backs of her teeth through her eye! I catch her in time; we let it go.*

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*I follow Mom to the bathroom all the time. She can't get the toilet paper thing right. I wipe her bottom with a wipe, and every time she says “Thank you!” as if I've just clasped a necklace for her.*

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*Mom goes to bed early one night. Later, I head down the tiny hall of the park model. Through the open bedroom door I spot Mom, squatting over the wastebasket.*

*“Mom! Don’t go potty in the wastebasket! Come to the bathroom!”*

*She looks at me with equal parts pragmatism and vacancy. “But I already did it. I don’t think there’s any point in doing it again.”*

*She has indeed “done” it; there is a puddle in the bottom of the wastebasket.*

*As she crawls back into bed, she looks at me searchingly. “Am I doing okay?” she asks. This feels like a question coming from her whole true self. “Am I doing anything wrong?”*

*Heartbreaking. Oh Mom. Are you doing okay. How can I answer? On one hand, no, you’re not doing okay at all. You just peed in the wastebasket. On the other hand, you are kind, positive, loving, and innocent as a child. The truer answer surely is yes, you are as okay as any of us.*

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Do I love these pebbles because I sought out and clung to positive memories from a time that was mostly difficult? Or is there something luminescent about a person stripped of fluff, distilled, to a more transparent essence?

Mom died Tuesday of last week, almost 5 years after we took her to the dementia unit in my South Dakota hometown. I have no pebbles from these years. Mom had gradually seeped away. The last time I saw her, the only thing I recognized was the way she crossed her legs, and the way her toes naturally pointed.

Now everyone's helping dig up and polish the memories of the pre-Alzheimer's years. If I keep them in my pocket, eventually they'll let light through too.