

THE DAY MUM DISAPPEARED

Interview with Matt Schmidt

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Richard: I'm Richard Fox, and today on *Messages of hope*, we're exploring what it's like to be the child of ageing parents. Where do you find hope when an illness like dementia changes the relationship you have with your parents?

Today we're talking with Matt about his journey with ageing parents.

Matt, what was life like growing up in the Schmidt house?

Matt: Yeah, the Schmidt house. I think just growing up as a country kid with loving Christian parents was just such a privilege and honour. My father, Ray, was a Lutheran minister, and I remember as a kid, Dad would go out and do lots of visits on farms and communities. I'd be lucky enough to follow him sometimes if there were some other kids out there. And we just lived a really free life.

And Mum was always there supporting. She taught at the Lutheran school where she was the organist, played piano, would run the women's guild. So yeah, for me, it was just a really rich upbringing in Christ and in a strong family, great values in life.

Richard: What were their personalities like as you were growing up, and what made your mum and dad special?

Matt: Well, I always remember Dad as someone who was a deep thinker, never raised his voice, would love to chat. I'd remember Dad coming to kick the footy with me. I have three older sisters, they never helped, so it was either me kicking by myself or whatever. So, Dad would make time out for me to kick the footy, to do those things. And he loved people, and that's something that I think I've inherited, the love of just people and talking and supporting people. Mum was just always smiling, always happy, always doing the household duties. And we'd always have music on in the house and singing, and just family time for us was really special.

Richard: Can you remember the first time you recognised that things weren't the same with your mum and dad?

Matt: Yeah. For our family, it started probably 10 years ago. Dad was diagnosed with Parkinson's, and you'd see Dad just slowing up a little bit and I'm thinking, 'Well, hang on, that's a bit different.; He was slow with his responses, with his talking, some things that he couldn't do like he used to do. I'd be really worried about him cutting firewood, but he would not stop doing anything.

Then Mum started with memory loss. Initially, it was just things like Mum would be a bit forgetful, and then some skills like cooking. Mum was always a great cook, it would just

drop off a little bit. So, they're all the little signs and symptoms. For us, it was pretty hard when you see that. I think Dad just covered it up really well, and was so supportive.

The trigger for us is that Mum and Dad used to pick my kids up from childcare and school. Mum took them up one day, and they went shopping, and Mum forgot where the car was. So, eventually, we had a conversation about it with Dad. We went to a memory doctor and did some tests and, yeah, Mum was diagnosed with dementia.

So, from there, Mum would start losing things. So it was losing the car keys, and things that Dad loved to do, like the paper or his book or his devotion book would go missing. Because Dad would be reading, but Mum wouldn't want dad to read so she would hide things. So, I'd come around and then, eventually, it would be, 'What am I looking for, Dad?' And it's, 'Oh, car keys and, yeah, I'd love the newspaper.' So I'm not laughing about it, but you have to look back and laugh at those tough times.

Progressively over the years, their health failed them a little bit more to a stage where we were quite worried about Mum and also worried about Dad's capacity to care.

Richard: Trying to keep a sense of humour can be helpful. But after Matt's parents moved into an independent unit in an aged care village for extra support, the full reality of Mum's dementia really hit home - on the day she disappeared.

Matt: The real difficult day was Dad rang me, I was at work in the city, and Dad said, 'Oh, Mum's gone for a walk, but she's not back.' So I said, 'Well, how long she's been?' And Dad said, 'About an hour, and hour and a half.' So I raced back, and we contacted the police. It was so hard when you had to talk to the police and give a description and I think I had a photo from the night before, when I took Mum for a walk and that was such a tough day. I remember we tried to look everywhere. Where would she go? We contacted people within the village. Staff were looking for Mum. We went to the local shopping centre, and I think my mother-in-law jumped on a bus in case she jumped on a bus to go to City Cross, where she'd regularly go for years and things like that.

I remember just driving around the neighbourhood, relentless, looking for Mum, so this would've been seven or eight hours. I was just driving down one of the roads, and I ran into the policeman who was coordinating the search. I said, 'Well, it's nearly getting dark. What do we do?' And they said, 'Well, if we can't find her, the choppers will come here and start looking for your Mum.' By this stage, I was just in tears. I was really doing it tough and driving around, just thinking, 'Where could she be? Please, God, be with her.'

Anyway, about 20 minutes later, I had a phone call from the same policeman, and he said, 'Oh, look, we've had a phone call that we think it could be your Mum.' So he sort of told me the direction. I don't think I was supposed to go, but I just went. And yeah, luckily, there was someone collecting for the RSPCA and that Mum had gone up and said, 'I'm a bit thirsty' and had a conversation, and he rang the police. So we were so thankful that he picked up on some of these materials. She'd actually walked, probably as the crow would fly 7 kilometres, but walking may have been 12, 14 kilometres, you just don't know, and she was exhausted. But she still knew who I was and just said, 'It's time go home. I'm tired.' And that was so tough. It was such a relief.

But after that, we knew we had to do a lot more care. So, for the following months after that, it was almost daily visits in trying to keep my Mum occupied, taking her for walks. We call it walk and talks. By then, I knew that Mum was quite forgetful and wasn't her normal self. If I took Mum for a walk, Dad could just relax and read the paper and do those things.

That was tough, and then God works in great ways. This room came up at the dementia ward here, just down the road, and so Mum's been there now for over three years. That was a really tough decision as well to work through, but it was really a no-brainer. We needed it.

So as hard as it is breaking up Mum and Dad from their home, we just knew it was the thing to do. So, yeah, so Mum's been in the dementia ward. It's just a fantastic facility and so caring, she's safe, she's secure. Then Dad was able just to live and not have that worry so it was a burden lifted off his shoulders. We didn't know until when Mum moved out how much Dad was doing. It was just a true inspirational thing that Dad did.

Richard: Knowing that Mum and Dad are safe and cared for can bring peace and hope. Matt, your Mum has dementia and your father has Parkinson's. What does your relationship look like now that their illnesses are pretty advanced?

Matt: She still recognises us, she recognises Dad, but there are days that are a lot worse than the great days. So that's tough sometimes when she's having a bad day where she doesn't really want to do anything with you. Mum is getting more confused, is starting to lose the ability to dress herself, and Mum was always so well presented. She's still absolutely gorgeous and beautiful, but there's just some things with hygiene and a few things like that now that are becoming more regular. But she's still a wonderful, welcoming, happy person, but we are seeing some days where the happiness is tested a little bit.

The real challenge for my Dad has been just the failing health with Parkinson's, some mobility. And particularly for Dad, his memory is so sharp. He will remember the sandwiches that he had in 1959, when he drove up to Brisbane. He'll have tomato and cheese sandwiches, he'll remember that. But his struggles with his voice, to portray his speech, he struggles to have regular conversations and just a number of falls. So I worry that with Parkinson's, that's the thing, there'll be ongoing falls.

Richard: Is there anything that softens the pain of seeing an illness take your parents away?

Matt: Yeah. If I'm away, or no-one can be here, we know they're in good care. There is nothing like just someone to pop in and, yeah, can start talking or start playing the piano with Mum and doing those little things that can just keep her alive.

Richard: You mentioned playing the piano. I've often heard that music is one of the things that people with dementia still remember.

Matt: Oh, it's absolutely incredible to see. My Mum's always playing the organ and piano, and we've been really, really lucky that, up until now, Mum could still play the piano. And I think up until about 18 months ago, Mum was playing Christmas concerts and so we would have to support and help her through those things. But once the music was there, she'd read the music and she'd play, and it's just absolutely incredible. It staggers me that she can read music.

It's funny. We walk in the village and one of the ladies here when I'm taking Mum goes, 'Oh, Judy, the piano lady,' and it's just the funniest thing. So, one of the best things that they do in a ward with dementia patients is put on the old hymns and the words up on the screen, everyone comes alive. You can get a small smile, or a little tap of the fingers or toes going and to this day, I don't know the science behind it, but there's something about

music and dementia, and to have Mum such a lover of music and to still be able to play the piano and to sing.

So, one of the true blessings and I have still now is to take Dad, visit with Dad, to assist Dad to make sure Mum's settled. And we have a conversation, but then we'll always put on some music. And for me, that's my Mum and Dad. I remember that when I grew up, they were singing music and I'd be there listening and running around. But now when I visit, I can see the love of the music that they have. Mum would always remember the tune. For instance, Amazing Grace. Everyone knows the first verse of Amazing Grace. The second verse, maybe not. My Dad knows every word and he knows, if you say, 'What's the Lord is My Shepherd, Dad? What number is that in the hymnbook?' He knows straightaway. So, I get the hymnbook now with Mum and I'll follow the words with Mum. It's just such a true blessing that we can have that opportunity, and to do that.

Richard: I love the way you said it. 'That was my parents. That is my parents. And that is the way my parents will always be.' The comfort and hope that God can give through the joy of music and relationships with each other can't be underestimated. Even through the tragedy of dementia and ailing health, the connections we can have with our parents can be inspiring and hopeful. The Christian hymns and songs like Amazing Grace and The Lord is My Shepherd can give hope to parents and children of all ages.

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