

Crossword creator helps aging puzzle fans while spreading awareness of Alzheimer's

KATHY STEVENS *The York Dispatch*

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He grew up in suburban West Hartford, Conn., the youngest of three boys, the son of an aeronautical engineer.

Douglas Fink did a little bit of everything to occupy his free time -- television, movies, bicycle rides.

But his favorite was puzzles. Mostly he liked word puzzles, whether word seeks, mazes or anagrams. He hated "with a passion" crossword puzzles like the ones his father did.

These days, though, Fink is a top-selling author whose crossword puzzles sell nationwide. Tuesday, he gave away hundreds of copies of his most recent publication, designed for seniors.

The book, "The Everything Easy Large-Print Crosswords Book," is designed for those with memory problems. The idea for a senior-friendly book was born partly because of his father, who in the past several years was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, a disease that eventually erases one's memory.

Fink does not want to identify his father, saying he'd like to maintain his family's privacy. But he talked about challenges of watching the disease take hold of his dad, who is now in his 70s and in an assisted care facility.

Didn't realize at first: Fink recalled his childhood and evenings spent with his father watching "Jeopardy." Fink could ask his dad anything about science and receive an answer. But Fink's father is the quiet type, so when Alzheimer's set in, neither Fink nor his brothers were certain if there was a problem or if their mother was "reading too much into it."

But as time passed, they all realized something was wrong.

"He was at the top of his game, an aeronautical engineer," Fink said while taking a break from the "How healthy is your memory?" booth at the York Senior Expo.

"Now he doesn't know how airplanes fly," Fink said.

The toughest part, Fink says, is conversing with his father, moving beyond questions such as, "How are you feeling?"

"Every time I see him, I go in and introduce myself as his son," Fink said.

His father once told him that the best way to describe the effects of Alzheimer's was to pencil a picture of a head and then erase the top part of it.

"It's there, but it's fuzzy," Fink said.

Because Alzheimer's is believed to be genetic, Fink says he wonders whether his own memory lapses are a sign of trouble to come or the result of being spread too thin among his wife, children and part-time and full-time jobs. Now 42 and living in Monroe, Conn., he says he'll take life as it comes and do his best to help others spot early-onset Alzheimer's.

People like Barbara and Kermit Messinger of Thomasville are watchful for signs of Alzheimer's. The two stopped by the booth for a copy of Fink's book and to take an eight-question memory survey. Barbara Messinger, 70, says her late father had Alzheimer's.



Author Douglas Fink sketches a crossword puzzle at his How healthy is your memory? booth...

"The last thing dad said to me was, 'Who are you?'" she said. "My brother has Alzheimer's, too."

Her father, Raymond Shaub, died in 1997 when he was 91 years old.

Preliminary screening: Messinger said she took the [Memories to Treasure survey](#) that attempts to distinguish memory glitches associated with age versus early onset Alzheimer's. The survey has questions on whether the person has trouble with handling finances, has trouble learning to use gadgets and is repetitive.

The survey is a screening tool to help determine whether additional tests might be needed. Fink said, as an author, there's nothing like giving away stacks of books while helping people become aware of Alzheimer's.

It's a journey he began 19 years ago, before his father was sick, and at the time he finally gave in to crossword puzzles.

Fink said a job in Boston's Chinatown prompted his love of the crossword puzzle. After all, it was a necessity while taking the train -- the blue line to the orange line every morning for years. Now, the book has become sort of a tribute to his father.

"It's intentionally designed for seniors," he said. "I took out pop culture, and old is never clued in a negative way."

■ Reach Kathy Stevens at 505-5437 or kstevens@yorkdispatch.com.

Understanding Alzheimer's

Alzheimer's disease affects an estimated 4.5 million Americans, most of whom are age 60 and older. The risk increases with age, with nearly half of people 85 and older having the disease, according to the National Institute on Aging.

Early onset of the disease is signaled by mild forgetfulness, forgetting details of recent events or names of long-time friends or family. Those symptoms often are ignored because decreased memory often is associated with age.

As the disease progresses, symptoms progress and begin to interfere with daily life. One might forget to brush one's hair or teeth, familiar places become unfamiliar, thoughts are muddled and people with the disease eventually don't recognize those closest to them.

Researchers note that if caught sooner rather than later, medications can slow Alzheimer's effects so, at least, the person afflicted can have a say in care. Alzheimer's cannot be positively diagnosed until after death, but doctors now know what to look for and how to rule out other disorders and diseases that could cause similar symptoms. Alzheimer's was first discovered in 1906 by Dr. Alois Alzheimer, a German physician who discovered abnormalities in the brain of a woman who, while living, was diagnosed with mental illness.

The doctor noted "clumps" and "tangled bundles of fiber," which are commonly known in the research world as "plaques" and "tangles." Doctors also have found additional signs of the disease after the person dies, such as dead nerve cells, which some believe results from plaques and tangles, according to NIA.

Information about Alzheimer's is available online at the National Institute on Aging at www.nia.nih.gov or may be obtained through your doctor.