UCLA students rally against Alzheimer’s

By Shevta Balakrishnan and Shadee Giurgiu

Medical student Brandon Kuiper, who specializes in geriatric psychophatology, remembers the day his great-grandmother Trudy stopped playing her favorite tunes on the piano. She claimed she could no longer read the music, but he knew this wasn’t the case. She couldn’t recall the notes she once played from memory.

He remembers when she became para- noid that her husband had moved in with the lady next door. He listened while his grandfather, full of hesitation and with an- guish in his voice, said, “Dad didn’t leave you, Mom. Dad’s been dead for six years.” He remembers eagerly approaching her to comfort in his voice, said, “Dad didn’t leave you, Mom. Dad’s been dead for six years.”

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“I remember very young at the time his great-grandmother was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease, is now an active member of the student advisory group UGADA (Universal Gerontology and Alzheimer’s Disease Awareness).

Kuiper’s story is only one of the scenarios in America’s youth will soon face. By the year 2030, the last of the baby boomers will have turned 65, and the population of those older than age 65 will increase from 35 million to about 73 million. An alarming two-thirds of these baby boomers will develop at least one chronic disease. One of the most is menacing Alzheimer’s.

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Every 69 seconds someone develops Alzheimer’s disease and, according to the Alzheimer’s Association, it is the sixth leading cause of death in the United States. From 2000 to 2008, death rates have declined for most major diseases, while Alzheimer’s deaths have risen 66%. And there is no cure in sight. An estimated 10 million baby boomers will develop Alzheimer’s disease, making it almost certain that each and every one of us will have an old or family member with Alzheimer’s.

UGADA Make It Happen

Over the next 10 to 30 years, public policy and the economy will be determined by Generations X and Y. As Dr. Debra Cherry, executive vice president of the Alzheimer’s Association, California Southland Chapter, puts it, “They are the future scientists, physicians and legislators whose engagement now will assure we have future leaders to combat the disease’s onslaught and to support those who are afflicted.”

In 2005, as students at UCLA, we observed that there were campus groups advocating cancer research, AIDS awareness, and other diseases, but realized there was no youth group dedicated to aging and Alzheimer’s. We decided to change this.

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UGADA Connected to the Cause

UGADA hosts the largest student-run conference on aging and Alzheimer’s in the nation. Past honorees have included the Reagan family and Bill Nye the Science Guy. We also link students who are eager to conduct research to various aging-related labs, fueling the drive to find new solutions.

We feel that it’s never too early to get involved. One of our advisors, Dr. Larry Butcher, reminds us, “Aging starts at age 0!” Our members present topics on aging to high school students to facilitate an early interest in pursuing careers in gerontology, helping to reduce the shortage of specialists in aging.

We’ve teamed up with celebrities to put on “Rock Out 4 Alzheimer’s,” a rock star chair marathon event that raises money for Alzheimer’s research. Each year, UGADA members volunteer at the Alzheimer’s Association and participate in events such as the Walk to End Alzheimer’s. We’ve stood alongside thousands of others in Sacramento, Calif., advocating for research funding, and have petitioned policymakers.

UGADA aims to create a personal connection to the cause, with volunteers spending time at local senior centers. Our members reach out to young people and their families that are deeply impacted by the disease, and provide emotional support.

“Having a youth network brings me comfort, support and understanding from people my age who are also struggling while caring for someone with Alzheimer’s,” says Lindsey Jordan, a 17-year-old caregiver for her father, who was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s at age 91.

Our goal is to create a nationwide network of youth groups working toward solving these problems of aging. We are now a national movement, hoping to identify at least one group in each state in the next few years, and create groups where there is a lack. Together, we can be the backbone for young people dealing with these issues, and be better prepared for what is to come in the near future.

Shadee Giurgiu and Shevta Balakrishnan are co-founders of UGADA: The Youth Movement, and recent UCLA graduates.

UGADA’s advisors are Fernando Torres-Gil, Ph.D., Dr. Gary W. Small, Yeva Delband, Melissa Goldman, Karen J. Miller, Ph.D., and Dr. Isaac Yang.

Advocacy by the Numbers

UGADA operates as a virtual movement, spreading the word via e-mail, text and social media. It doesn’t take a lot of text to make a difference:

- Update on Facebook: 420 characters
- Twitter: 140 characters
- Text message: 160 characters, maximum
- Ways to get the message across to youth: unlimited

Robert Butler’s legacy

Robert Butler’s presence, even in his physical absence, is still deeply felt. In his memory, we should take to heart Butler’s anger at stereotypic images of age, and remember his outrage over age-based injustices. Like him, ever curious to find out something new, we should advocate for research and initiatives that promote well-being for elders and those advancing in years. Let us work together tirelessly with Butler’s sense of boundless optimism, a kind word and a helping hand.

Robert Butler, professor and author Andrew Achenbaum, who teaches at the University of Houston, Texas, is completing a book-length study of Robert Butler and his times. He serves on the editorial board of Generations, ASA’s quarterly journal.