

UCLA students rally against Alzheimer's

By **Shweta Balakrishnan** and **Shadee Giurgius**

Medical student Brandon Kuiper, who specializes in geriatric psychiatry, 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 paranoid that her husband had moved in with the lady next door. He listened while his grandfather, full of hesitation and with anguish in his voice, said, "Dad didn't leave you, Mom. Dad's been dead for six years." He remembers eagerly approaching her to extend birthday wishes, and how powerless he felt when she asked him, "Who am I sitting next to?"

Trudy died in 2007, but Kuiper, who was very young at the time his great-grandmother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, is now an active member of the student advocacy group UGADA (Universal Gerontology and Alzheimer's Disease Awareness).

Kuiper's story is only one of the scenarios America's youth will soon face. By the year 2030, the last of the baby boomers will have turned age 65, and the population of those older than age 65 will increase from 30 million to about 72 million. An alarming two-thirds of these baby boomers will develop at least one chronic disease. One of the most is menacing Alzheimer's.

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

this disease, making it almost certain that each and every one of us will have a friend 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.

Over the next 10 to 30 years, public policy and the economy will be determined by Generations X and Y.

With the advice of Yeva Delband, Melissa Goldman, Karen J. Miller, Ph.D., and Dr. Isaac Yang, we created the Universal Gerontology and Alzheimer's Disease Awareness (UGADA) Association. Commonly known as UGADA: The Youth Movement, the group is a nonprofit committed to promoting Alzheimer's awareness among high school, college and graduate students. We believe that by spreading knowledge and creating a sense of urgency, our peers will become more invested in aging and Alzheimer's.

"One of the greatest challenges we face in dealing with Alzheimer's disease is in expanding public awareness of the illness. This is a disease that attacks peo-



Universal Gerontology & Alzheimer's Disease Awareness (UGADA) Youth Movement members at the Alzheimer's Association, California Southland Chapter's Annual Walk to End Alzheimer's in Los Angeles.

Photo: Courtesy UGADA

ple as they age, and the youth of our nation has not fully appreciated how it will affect their lives. UGADA is at the forefront of reversing this trend," says our advisor Dr. Gary Small, director of the UCLA Longevity Center and author of *iBrain: Surviving the Technological Alteration of the Modern Mind* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).

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 finding 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 rocking 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 51.

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 Giurgius and Shweta 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.

Putting Words into Action

The following three actions can help UGADA expand its youth network:

1. If you know of a youth group focused on aging or Alzheimer's disease, tell us about it.
2. If you know of a school or area that doesn't have a group focused on aging or Alzheimer's, create one! We can help.
3. Contact us at www.TheYouthMovement.org, shadee.ugada@gmail.com, or call (530) YOUTH-17, or (530) 968-8417.

Robert Butler's legacy

› CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6

and ethical and social values. The following three areas, dear to his heart, are where I believe serious legacy work should be done:

• **Gerontologists and geriatricians should incorporate life-course perspectives into basic and applied research on productive, healthful aging.** Butler often expressed regret that he did not stress more explicitly that many potentials and pitfalls of late life (such as obesity and substance abuse) emerge in youth and middle age. He enriched our understanding of the capacity, resilience and potential of men and women in late life. He did not view old age as an extension of middle age. Nor was he oblivious to the physical,

mental and social challenges many—especially women and minorities—faced as they approached the end of life. Without exalting exceptional elders, or overlooking those who were vulnerable, Butler saw the extra years as a triumph.

• **Shaping programs and laws that would enhance the quality of aging beyond "mere survival."** For most of his career, Butler concentrated on laws and policies that discriminated against age. In *The Longevity Revolution* (2008), he broadened his age-based policy agenda to focus on domains conjoining global and local issues, demography and destiny. He was deeply concerned about the degradation of the environment, which, if unchecked, would leave future generations at risk. Baby boomers, Butler be-

lieved, should become "gray and green," working with neighbors and people abroad to be responsible stewards of our common weal.

• **Combating ageism.** Butler coined the term "ageism" in an interview with Carl Bernstein in 1968. Finding ageism prevalent in medical settings, the marketplace, labor force and media, he deplored its deleterious impact on self-esteem and dignity. Initially he compared ageism to racism and sexism. Over time, he acknowledged virulent facets of ageism, a pathological fear growing in epidemic proportions as populations aged around the world. Rather than celebrate the gift of extra years, people of all ages derogated the aged as worthless, sexless, garrulous, vacuous, greedy geezers. Ageism remains one of the few prejudices still

tolerated in polite society and private conversation.

Robert Butler's presence, even in its 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. ■

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.