

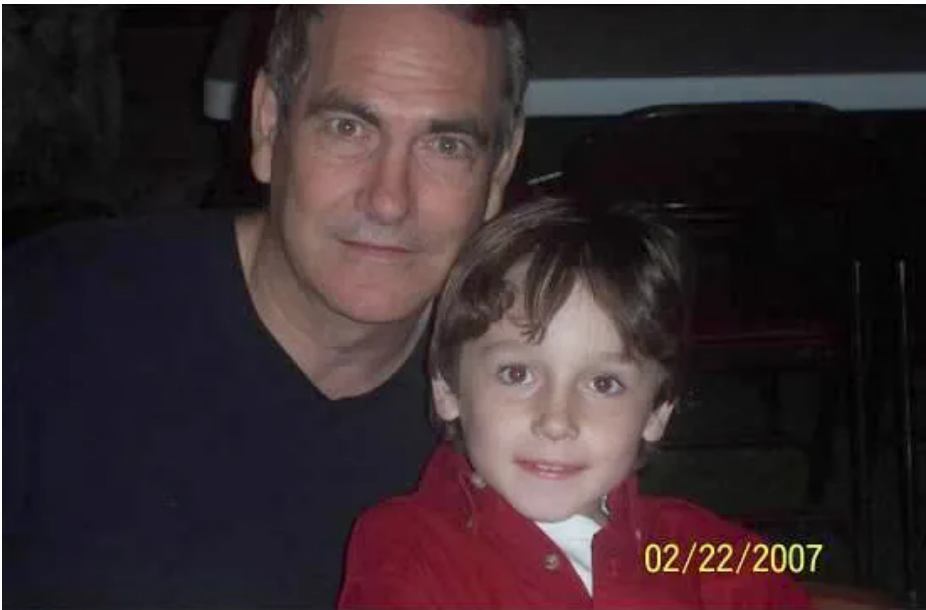
# Find Your Voice

September 9, 2016 by Guest Contributor

” *As long as I can remember, from the age of 8 or 9, I have been a caregiver.*

My childhood was spent helping my Mom in her role as a primary caregiver. As a child it was all I really knew – it was my way of life.

The story starts with my sister. My only sibling, Brittany, is just 16 months older than me, and was diagnosed with autism a few weeks after my 1st birthday. Then, shortly after I started kindergarten, my Dad was diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer’s. Our household became one that required constant care and supervision, arrangements for special needs and was definitely chaotic at times. We were certainly different from other kids’ families.



I was given enormous responsibilities at a really young age, but I happily chipped in because it was what was needed in our home. I frequently had to explain to new friends and neighbors that my sister had autism and my Dad had Alzheimer’s. Most of the time, once they saw the full picture, it became more than they could handle.



Kim and Brandon

In 8th grade, I found my voice. After sharing my story at a few local events for the Alzheimer’s Association in the Phoenix area, I was invited to take it to the national level. That year, I attended the [Alzheimer’s Association Annual Advocacy Forum](#) in Washington DC. It was there while taking my story to the congressional members and staff on Capitol Hill that I began to see the power in sharing my story. At that moment, I realized that I found a platform to make a difference.

As I made my way through the rest of middle school and into high school, I dedicated time and energy to raising awareness, supporting families and raising funds to find a cure for Alzheimer’s. My voice became a website, [www.barkyshope.com](http://www.barkyshope.com), where I share my story.

By becoming involved rather than staying silent, I met amazing people from all around the country. They have inspired me, become my mentors, and stood by me as lifelong friends. Connecting to others and finding ways to make a difference is how I balanced a life of caregiving.

” *Find your voice, no matter how large or small. Sharing your experience as a caregiver with others will make a difference!*

**Brandon Barkwell**

Scottsdale, AZ

Age 17

[www.BarkysHope.com](http://www.BarkysHope.com)