

Dementia?

Don't Go It Alone

BY Jennifer Myers

She was in her late 70s the night her car got stuck in the sand somewhere on the West Mesa. She was alone.

The drive from her son's house in Bernalillo after dinner toward her home in Rio Rancho was a trip Elsie Howell had taken dozens of times, but that night she became disoriented. After nearly 24 hours of search efforts by local authorities, family members and friends, a news station helicopter pilot found Elsie late afternoon the following day and delivered her safely to her worried family. Elsie would later joke about spending the night with the snakes and coyotes — but to her daughter-in-law, Jody Howell, that was the moment she knew that despite her own love and feelings of responsibility to care for Elsie, she was no longer enough.

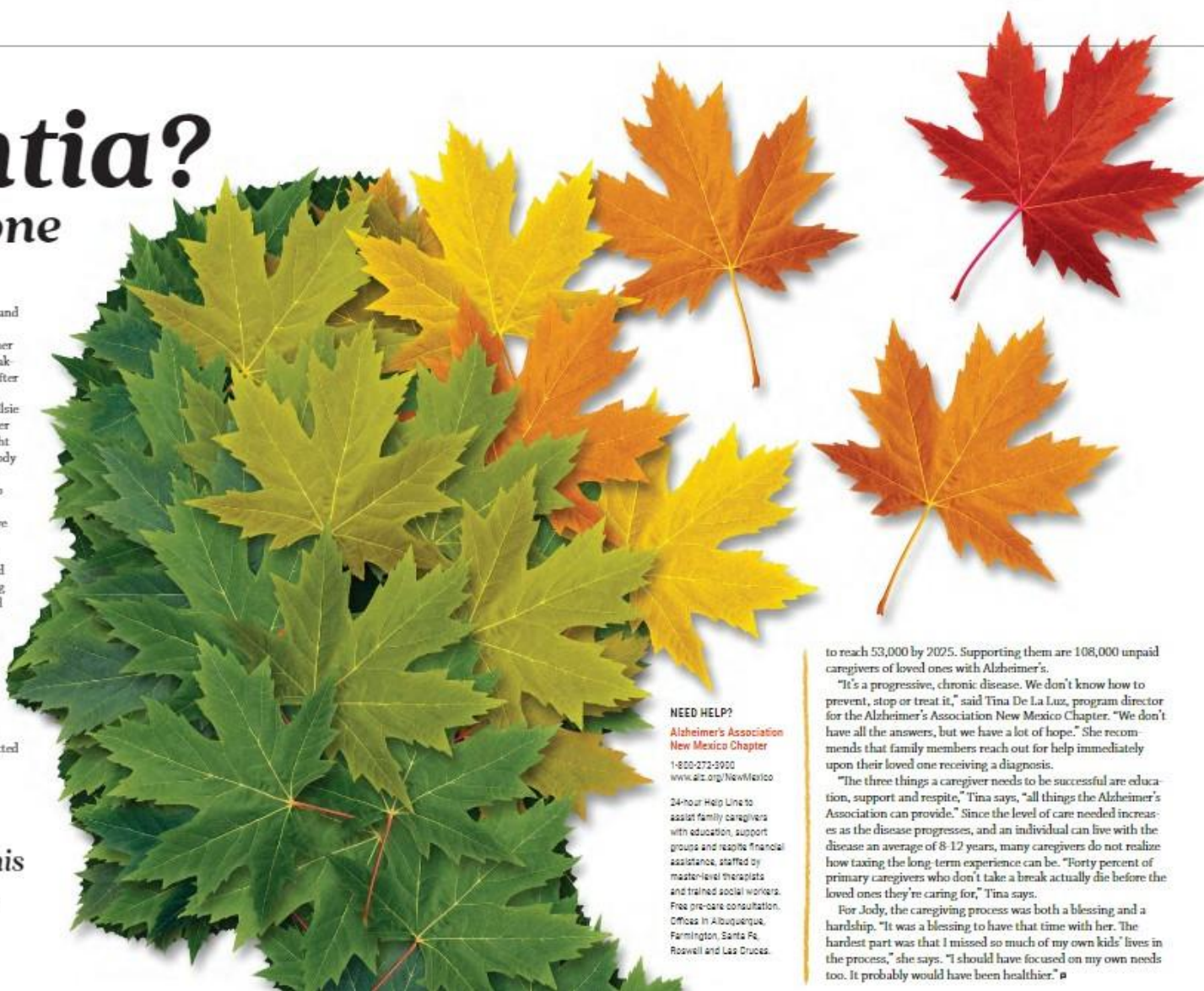
Elsie died in January of 2018 at 92 years of age. The last five years of her life were spent in a nursing home. Jody served as her mother-in-law's primary caregiver for 15 years, all the while unaware of the resources available to caregivers of loved ones living with dementia. She didn't even think about asking for help. "I'd watched my grandparents go down this road and assumed it was just done this way."

"The symptoms started with Elsie forgetting to pay her bills. Eventually she stopped doing laundry and keeping her house in order. 'It was a really slow progression,' Jody says, 'but I knew it was serious when we realized that Mom wasn't showering.'"

According to the Alzheimer's Association, 41,000 New Mexicans are currently diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease — one of more than 100 types of dementia. That number is expected

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NEED HELP?

Alzheimer's Association
New Mexico Chapter

1-800-272-3900
www.alz.org/NewMexico

24-hour Help Line to assist family caregivers with education, support groups and respite financial assistance, staffed by master-level therapists and trained social workers. Free pre-care consultation. Offices in Albuquerque, Farmington, Santa Fe, Roswell and Las Cruces.

to reach 53,000 by 2025. Supporting them are 108,000 unpaid caregivers of loved ones with Alzheimer's.

"It's a progressive, chronic disease. We don't know how to prevent, stop or treat it," said Tina De La Luz, program director for the Alzheimer's Association New Mexico Chapter. "We don't have all the answers, but we have a lot of hope." She recommends that family members reach out for help immediately upon their loved one receiving a diagnosis.

"The three things a caregiver needs to be successful are education, support and respite," Tina says, "all things the Alzheimer's Association can provide." Since the level of care needed increases as the disease progresses, and an individual can live with the disease an average of 8-12 years, many caregivers do not realize how taxing the long-term experience can be. "Forty percent of primary caregivers who don't take a break actually die before the loved ones they're caring for," Tina says.

For Jody, the caregiving process was both a blessing and a hardship. "It was a blessing to have that time with her. The hardest part was that I missed so much of my own kids' lives in the process," she says. "I should have focused on my own needs too. It probably would have been healthier."