

# Raffaela



**NICK CICHETTI'S 85-YEAR-OLD** mother Raffaela is fading. As the family member overseeing her care, he knows what he must do. And he does it willingly and lovingly, viewing his responsibility as an honor. Never mind that this path is marked by sadness and disappointment.

Raffaela has been a resident at Wartburg, a senior living residence in Mount Vernon, since 2019. When neighbors reported seeing the once-lively and dignified Raffaela picking through their garbage bins, Nick finally admitted his mother's behavior had reached a critical point. "The disease had taken over," he says.

Cicchetti, 60, has lived in Mount Vernon all his life. The second of three sons born to Raffaela and Salvatore Cicchetti, Italian immigrants who settled there in 1958, Nick grew up in the large home the family still owns. Salvatore worked for the City of Mount Vernon and Raffaela stayed home until the youngest started school.

When his brothers moved away, Nick readily assumed responsibility for his aging parents' care. But a few months after Salvatore's death in 2010, Nick began to notice changes in his mother—changes so slight other family members barely noticed.

In 2016, Nick brought Raffaela to a neurological evaluation. Several more assessments and rounds of testing resulted in an Alzheimer's diagnosis. The doctors recommended she remain in her home. "I didn't agree," says Nick flatly.

The forgetfulness grew worse, followed by lapses in Raffaela's personal hygiene. On long walks around the city, she began getting lost. Still hoping to keep

her at home where she felt safe and happy, he enrolled her in Wartburg's adult day program and engaged a home care agency to provide care until her bedtime.

Although Nick's job kept him busy, he stopped by his mother's home twice a day to supervise her medications and coax her to eat. "She'd say she wasn't hungry, so I'd leave the food for when she got hungry," he says. Days later he might discover the meal under her bed.

One of the aides reported Raffaela was sometimes combative. She became more cantankerous and less easygoing. She started to revert to her native Italian. She began calling her son at all hours. Many nights Nick would be on the phone, soothing her fears and coaxing her back to bed.

Eventually, the family decided on Wartburg's residential memory care program so Raffaela could remain in Mount Vernon. She is happier now, Nick says, and he and other family members visit often. Hardest to accept, though, is that, "The person sitting in front of me is not my mom. She doesn't converse. She doesn't recognize me. It's totally heartbreaking." He blames the forced isolation during the pandemic for his mother's latest decline.

"For a vibrant, talkative woman who sacrificed everything to raise three boys, to see what she's become..." He trails off. "I call it [Alzheimer's] a monster. It's taken away my mother. But I keep doing what I can to keep her happy. Not because I have to but because it's a pleasure."

## THE 10 SIGNS OF ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

- 1 memory loss that disrupts daily life
- 2 challenges in solving problems
- 3 difficulty completing familiar tasks at home, at work or at leisure
- 4 confusion with time or place
- 5 trouble understanding visual images and spacial relationships
- 6 new problems with words in speaking or writing
- 7 misplacing things and losing the ability to retrace steps
- 8 decreased or poor judgment
- 9 withdrawal from work or social activities
- 10 changes in mood and personality

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