

Hearthreak, and Long Goodbyes

For students, faculty, administration, alumni and sports fans of the University of Tennessee, this has been a difficult, emotional year. Alzheimer's disease has hit us all hard.

First, it claimed Hall of Fame Coach Pat Head Summitt, who led the university's Lady Vols to 1,098 victories, the most in NCAA basketball history, compared to only 208 losses (.841 percentage). She served as head coach from 1974 until she retired at age 59 in 2012 because of a diagnosis of early-onset Alzheimer's disease. During her tenure, the Lady Vols won eight national championships. Summitt died on June 28 of this year.



On Sept. 4, Nannie Lee Fulmer, 91, mother of legendary UT football Coach Phillip Fulmer, passed away after a long battle with Alzheimer's. Coach Fulmer directed the football team from 1992 to 2008, compiling a 152-52 record and winning the national championship in 2008.

Mrs. Fulmer, of Winchester, Tennessee, was the matriarch of the Fulmer family. "Mema" was also the inspiration for the entire Fulmer family

to become Alzheimer's Tennessee Champions. As with all families affected by the disease, it was hard to watch Alzheimer's effect on Mrs. Fulmer.

In April at the 2016 Knoxville Alzheimer's Tennessee Walk, Coach Fulmer responded when asked how his mother was doing: "I wish I could say 'well,' I wish I could say 'better,' but this is a very mean and ugly disease. The impact it has on all of us is significant. I remember the day that my Mom did not know who I was."

During a kickoff luncheon for the 2015 event in Knoxville, Fulmer shared about visiting his mother during the early stages of Alzheimer's.

"She started zipping all over the house looking, in a panic, and I said, 'Mom, what's wrong? What can I do for you?' She said, 'I'm looking for my phone, and I said, 'It's right here, it's plugged in, it's charged. Can I call someone for you?' She said, 'No, I need to call 911 – you're not supposed to be here.' She had no idea who I was."

The coach then related that his mother recognized the pictures hanging in her home of his children when they were babies. And she proceeded to show the coach a dated picture of himself, and was proud to tell him about her son, Phillip.

(more)

Coach Fulmer's daughters, who have served as chairpersons for the Knoxville Alzheimer's Tennessee Walk in the spring, have also talked about their "Mema." They would smile about her biscuits and gravy, how she played with their hair, and the way she laughed. But those were memories of what their grandmother was like before Alzheimer's disease.

"Slowly, but surely, we're having to say goodbye every time we see Mema," Allison Fulmer Mahan, Coach Fulmer's youngest daughter, said a few years ago.

At one point, the Fulmer family enjoyed a rare glimpse of the past – and their Mema's love – when someone discovered a birthday card the coach's mother had written but never sent.

"My Dad got to experience the *I love you's* and *I'm proud of you's* that he may never hear again," Courtney Fulmer Peace said at that time. "To love someone before they're really gone is especially hard and heartbreaking, and that's why we walk every spring."



Every family hit by Alzheimer's can relate to these experiences of the Fulmer – and Summitt – families.

Across our country, in the communities where Life Care and Century Park serve, Walks to End Alzheimer's will be taking place this fall. Let's be involved to defeat this dread disease.

This is the third year of fundraising for us as a National Team, and the competition to be the Life Care or Century Park team that raises the most donations is strong. If your facility or retirement community has not registered its team, please do so by following [these instructions](#).

– Beecher Hunter