

Let's Go Say Hi to Grandpa

by Olivia I. Nolan, Family Member of PLwD

Hi, my name's Olivia. I am 11 years old. My grandpa loves cars, telling jokes, and eating cake and pierogies (my family's Lithuanian Christmas dish: boiled dough, stuffed with meat). He also has dementia. For those of you who know about Teepa's GEMS[®], his GEMS state is usually Ruby. Last spring, my cousins came to visit. When they were asked by their parents to go say hi to Grandpa, they seemed very nervous and didn't really say anything to him. Later, when I asked one of my cousins if she was okay, she told me that she didn't really like visiting Grandpa –maybe because she didn't know what to do or what to say to him.

It made me almost sad because they didn't know what I have learned: that he is still in there and that he's just changing. I didn't know if they knew how to see that.

So this Christmas, my dad asked me to use my PAC skills, and show my cousins how they could talk to Grandpa. Before dinner, I said, "Ok, guys, let's go say hi to Grandpa," and we went upstairs. My Aunt Teresa saw us and stepped aside. My cousins stayed behind me. Grandpa was looking like he was asleep, so I went down on my knees (got low), I said "Hey Grandpa," and he looked up and smiled at me. I gently touched his hand and said, "It's your granddaughter, Olivia," and then I waited. After a little pause, he looked at me and said with a smile, "Well, of-course it is!" I spoke to him in short sentences and paused after each thing I said. I said, "Merry Christmas!" and he said, "Well, Merry Christmas!" I told him, "We're having pierogies!" and he chuckled and gave a big smile.

My older cousin was closest to me, and he had knelt down exactly as I had. I backed away, and my cousin talked to Grandpa about what was new and about his sports. Then, each of the cousins took their turn and talked to Grandpa about what was new in their life. He was very interested, stayed awake, looked at each of them. He had a big grin on his face the whole time. Everybody but the two shortest cousins knelt down for him to be able to see them.

I think they now have a memory that they might not have ever had if I hadn't tried to show them how to get to his level, engage him, and wait for his response. They have a memory of seeing their Grandpa awake, smiling, and talking to them! I felt so proud knowing that my cousins got to see their Grandpa awake and smiling.

In this picture, I am showing my cousins how to talk to Grandpa who is living with dementia. I hope that everyone talks to their Grandpa or Grandma and isn't afraid to try. If you pause, and look beyond the fact that their brain is changing, you can see that they're still in there, just in a different way. You can still enjoy little moments, just like the moments my cousins and I had this Christmas.

