

NIGHTLINE: The Science of Growing Old: 6/30/09

23:46:04 TERRY MORAN

(OC) More than five million Americans live with Alzheimer's disease. It's a long, hard road, not just for those who suffer from the disease but also for the caregiver, children tasked with caring for an increasingly dependent parent. Four years ago, ABC had the chance to put cameras inside a Texas home as a couple took on this terrible challenge, and my co-anchor Cynthia McFadden has followed the family ever since. Cynthia?

23:46:30 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN, ABC NEWS

(OC) Terry, one of the things we learned over these years is just how little most of us really understand about the disease itself. I thought I knew a lot about Alzheimer's, but after Blane and I took part in an experiment simulating what it's like to have the disease, I found out I didn't. It was 12 minutes that changed my life.

23:46:51 BLANE WILSON, SON

I love you, mom.

23:46:52 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(VO) Blane Wilson's mother Lawanda came to live with him four years ago. He had just married his new wife, Georgia, five weeks earlier. Blane soon learned it was much harder than he thought.

23:47:06 GEORGIA WILSON, WIFE

Oh, god. Blake. She's going to drive her car.

23:47:10 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(VO) And later, she did. She lit fires. She wandered off. But Lawanda doesn't look sick and she often seems fine. Which makes it hard for Blane and Georgia to understand how limited she really is. And that leads to frustration and resentment.

23:47:30 GEORGIA WILSON

Just tell her to wash her clothes, I'm tired of washing them. I'll bet you a hundred bucks she knows what to do. Are you afraid? I mean...

23:47:38 BLANE WILSON

No, I'm not afraid. You know, I mean, it's my mother. You don't understand.

23:47:43 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(VO) The more we watched the tapes, the more it became apparent how little Blane and George really understood what was happening to Lawanda's mind.

23:47:51 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(OC) Do you feel you understand the world your mother now lives in?

23:47:56 BLANE WILSON

No.

23:47:56 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(OC) What's going on in her head, her brain?

23:47:59 BLANE WILSON

I have no idea. I have no idea. I need to understand that then. I need

to know what it's like.

23:48:07 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(VO) So I told Blane about an experiment developed by PK Beville and administered by her colleague, Laurie Labishak. The experiment helps families and caregivers actually experience what it's like to have Alzheimer's.

23:48:20 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(OC) I understand it's a pretty rough experience.

23:48:22 BLANE WILSON

It needs to be experienced. If it'll help me to understand I would love to.

23:48:29 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(VO) I agreed to go do the experiment with him.

23:48:32 LAURIE LABISHAK, SECOND WIND DREAMS

Could you have a seat, please.

23:48:33 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(VO) Our journey into another world begins here in this bedroom where Blane and I are suited up with some deceptively harmless looking devices. Goggles simulating macular degeneration, glaucoma, and cataracts, conditions that older people with Alzheimer's often have. Likewise, latex gloves are placed on our hands and our fingers to taped to make our hands feel arthritic, clumsy, hard to bend. A substance is placed inside our shoes to make it harder for us to walk.

23:49:02 BLANE WILSON

Oh, that is uncomfortable.

23:49:05 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(VO) And on our heads, they place earphones, which emit an incessant jabbering. A clamor of noise that some Alzheimer's patients say is constant.

23:49:16 LAURIE LABISHAK

Individuals with dementia say we're hearing all this stuff and they can't turn it off.

23:49:22 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(VO) Then, we're each given five tasks to perform and only 12 minutes to accomplish them.

23:49:27 LAURIE LABISHAK

I would like you to find the tie and put it on.

23:49:31 BLANE WILSON

I can't hear you.

23:49:31 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(VO) Blane has a hard time concentrating from the start.

23:49:35 LAURIE LABISHAK

Your time begins now.

23:49:37 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(VO) As he enters, Blane is immediately disoriented. He staggers. Reminding us of the way his mother looked on our tapes. Blane tries to

accomplish his first task, clearing the dishes off the table. But when he goes to put them away, he can't find the kitchen. So he gives up.

23:50:01 BLANE WILSON

I don't, I don't know where to put them.

23:50:03 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(VO) Blane finally finds the kitchen but he can't remember why he's there. And again, the similarities to his mother were astounding.

23:50:11 BLANE WILSON

She would open the cabinets and then she would shut them. Mother, what are you doing? Nothing.

23:50:17 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(VO) But Blane is doing a lot better than I am.

23:50:19 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(OC) What the heck is this?

23:50:21 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(VO) It's only about two minutes into the experiment and the noise from the headset is driving me crazy.

23:50:29 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(OC) God. So annoying.

23:50:32 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(VO) As I try to accomplish my first task, find a white sweater, I work myself into a frenzy.

23:50:38 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(OC) White sweater.

23:50:39 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(VO) Remember, what I'm hearing is this. And believe me, it drives everything else out of your head.

23:50:47 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(OC) All right. Annoyed.

23:50:50 BLANE WILSON

This is tough. I felt confused. Kind of panicky. If I had to go through very much of that I just might go crazy.

23:50:59 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(OC) All right, that's not a sweater. That's not a white sweater.

23:51:02 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(VO) You do understand why people do start talking to themselves.

23:51:05 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(OC) This is not a white sweater.

23:51:07 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(VO) I was trying to organize my mind by saying okay...

23:51:10 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(OC) Okay, all right, all right, all right. Not a white sweater. Not there. I don't know about that.

23:51:20 PK BEVILLE, SECOND WIND DREAMS

You're doing great.

23:51:21 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(OC) PK was in the room and at one point when I sat down in frustration on the sofa and she said, you're doing great.

23:51:27 PK BEVILLE

(OC) Why don't you start with finishing setting the table?

23:51:30 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(OC) And she told me what else I was supposed to do.

23:51:33 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(OC) I'll remember that.

23:51:35 PK BEVILLE

The reinforcement.

23:51:36 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(OC) Yeah, 'cause you feel so alone. And you feel so frustrated and there's - you know, you don't know what you're supposed to do. And it's so dark.

23:51:45 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(VO) Reluctantly I go back into the kitchen to try to find the plates.

23:51:49 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(OC) Glasses. How long have I been doing this? About 20 hours? I'm not doing great. I'm not doing great.

23:51:55 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(VO) And once again, I get distracted and go looking for that white sweater.

23:52:00 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(OC) This looks good enough. This is like - okay. It's not exactly a sweater. All right. I'll put it over my shoulders.

23:52:09 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(VO) And I end up looking a little eccentric.

23:52:12 PK BEVILLE

Her son's going to say mamma, you can't go out like that. You're getting a little off here.

23:52:18 BLANE WILSON

God.

23:52:18 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(VO) In the meantime, Blane has moved on to the bedroom where he's supposed to match six pairs of socks.

23:52:24 BLANE WILSON

I don't know, man.

23:52:28 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(VO) Instead, he starts folding everything in sight.

23:52:31 BLANE WILSON

A sweater, man, this is crazy.

23:52:34 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(VO) By now, Blane seems to have forgotten his list of chores. He was supposed to have found this tie, for example, and put it on. Instead, he folds it along with everything else.

23:52:44 BLANE WILSON

Shoot.

23:52:45 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(VO) It reminded us of the time Blane's mother set out to cook something for lunch, then got distracted washing dishes and didn't remember until the pot was burning.

23:52:56 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(OC) Plates.

23:52:57 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(VO) After 12 excruciating minutes, the experiment was over.

23:53:03 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(OC) I give up.

23:53:05 PK BEVILLE

Blane? Your time is up.

23:53:07 BLANE WILSON

Huh?

23:53:09 PK BEVILLE

Your time is up.

23:53:09 BLANE WILSON

Oh, shoot.

23:53:11 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(OC) What an unpleasant experience.

23:53:14 BLANE WILSON

Damn.

23:53:15 PK BEVILLE

Yeah.

23:53:16 BLANE WILSON

I couldn't do anything.

23:53:19 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(VO) Blane was visibly shaken.

23:53:22 BLANE WILSON

What a way to try and get through each day and kind of scary.

23:53:27 PK BEVILLE

In what way?

23:53:28 BLANE WILSON

Well, almost like a panic.

23:53:31 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(VO) For both of us, new insights.

23:53:34 BLANE WILSON

It's a deep sense of confusion.

23:53:37 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(OC) The thing that shocks me the most is that I couldn't remember five simple instructions.

23:53:43 BLANE WILSON

I couldn't imagine living like that.

23:53:45 CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

(OC) It's life-altering.

23:53:47

BLANE WILSON

They need your help. They need your understanding.

23:53:54

ANNOUNCER

(OC) Amen. Despite the experiment, Cynthia reports that stress was too much. Lawanda is living with her sister and has had almost no contact with her son. Good luck to them. Our thanks to Cynthia for that. And you can find more Alzheimer's resources on our website at ABCNews.com.