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By Callie Thomas

Nancy Nelson

Meet the Neighbor

THREE LITTLE WORDS: BLUE. RIVER. APPLE. That's what the doctor told Nancy Nelson to remember at the beginning of her exam in the fall of 2013. After a series of tests she was asked to recite the three words again, but could only remember one. It was the day Nancy was diagnosed with early Alzheimer's disease. Now, they are three words she says she will never forget again. They've also become the name of one of many insightful poetry books on the exploration of Alzheimer's that she has written since that life-changing day. "I didn't know much about the condition, even though my father passed from Alzheimer's complications in 2002," she said. "The Alzheimer's Association Desert Southwest Chapter here in Las Vegas invited me with welcoming arms and nurtured me through a traumatic realization—that I'd been diagnosed. But I was soon determined that I didn't have to own the diagnosis."

World Alzheimer's Day is September 21st and 2018 marks the 24th year of raising awareness and empowering organizations with research and knowledge about Alzheimer's and dementia. Today there are 5.7 million that are diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, and by 2050 that number is said to rise to 16 million nationwide. Nelson, the feisty advocate with a passion as big as the outdoors, has been helping other Alzheimer's families, friends and caregivers with her light-hearted voice, which has also earned her the recognition of Nevada Senior Citizen of the Year. "I am honored, but in a way, I almost feel embarrassed by the recognition," she said after accepting the award. "I knew I was being considered, but still find myself in total disbelief to be the chosen one. The greatest part of this prestigious award is that Alzheimer's will be in front of more people for longer. THIS is good."

Nancy Nelson came to Las Vegas in 1965 in a Chevy convertible with her eldest daughter Michelle Renee snuggly wrapped in a baby carrier. She was on the way to her mother's house in Las

Vegas. It took some time, but she considers herself a desert rat today, after acclimating from rainy Washington State. She made a life for herself and her family which also includes her youngest daughter Jennifer and her son-in-law, Pete, four grandchildren Brayden, Delaney, Rachel Anne, Jack, and what Nelson calls many "bonus" children. In those early years, she worked for the airlines in one of the hotel city ticket offices on the Strip. "I often got invited to sit in the front row at the Hilton Hotel to see Elvis Presley performances," she recalls. "As a young lady from a small town in Washington, I was bright-eyed and mesmerized. Life was so simple and grand back then."

Today, Nancy Nelson is committed to helping others by giving them an inside view of the things she does to be "normal." This includes her volunteerism, speaking engagements, marching on Capitol Hill and lobbying for more Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia funding. She has also participated in a COBRE five-year clinical study. "Communication is key and understanding the dynamics of unasked-for caregiving responsibilities toward a loved one struggling with faulty memory is no easy task. Neither is being diagnosed with an Alzheimer's condition, but life is easier if both sides understand the other a bit better," says Nelson.

With her never-ending compassion and dedication, she has also been recognized as Volunteer of the Year 2016 by the Alzheimer's Association Desert Southwest Chapter Las Vegas, and has been inducted into the Nevada Women's Hall of Fame 2018. She continually speaks at education conferences, support groups, the Cleveland Clinic, Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health, Alzheimer's Nevada, Nevada Senior Services, and organizes monthly local author fundraisers for the Alzheimer's community. "My intent is that my story gives hope and some solutions in a how-to way, and my poetry books bridge the gap between those who have and those who do not." ♦