



## The “Why” of the Gayle Wells Foundation for Early Onset Alzheimer’s & Care

By: Melinda Mattson  
Freelance Writer & Memory Care Advocate

The Gayle Wells Foundation is run by one of my dearest lifelong friends. I can vouch for their incredible work and commitment to excellent dignified care for any caregiver or patient suffering from early onset Alzheimer’s disease.

To fully understand why Laura created this organization, it’s essential to understand the journey Laura and Gayle faced. In 2001, Gayle had a right mastectomy after a cancer diagnosis and another mastectomy three months later when cancer was discovered in Gayle’s left breast.



Gayle & Laura, June 2005

After chemotherapy, Gayle occasionally lost her train of thought and struggled with organizational tasks. The issues were explained away as side effects of chemo. Gayle seemed to be improving, but another blow came in 2005 when thyroid cancer was discovered.



While Gayle was a patient at MD Anderson Cancer Center, the pair received endless support and expert medical care. Abundant resources and a tangible blanket of care surrounded them.

By 2009, Gayle’s memory continued declining and tests confirmed the devastating diagnosis—early onset Alzheimer’s disease. But the worst was yet to come when the neurologist handed Laura a prescription with the hollow words, “Good luck, this will go fast.” The soaring difference between the comprehensive cancer care and the lack of early onset care was confounding.

Gayle’s condition progressed to episodes of delirium—one which found Gayle wandering into an extremely busy intersection. After this fright, Gayle was hospitalized. Laura was assured Gayle would be cared for. The next morning Laura found Gayle restrained to the bed, deprived of food or drink, and had not been given the basic decorum of a trip to the restroom.

Laura worked tirelessly to have Gayle admitted to a dementia unit but no availability left them unprotected in the ER. Though she explained Gayle’s medical history, the staff shared just

enough of Gayle's medical records with a local psychiatric hospital to portray her as a psychiatric patient and arrange a transfer.

The psychiatric hospital eventually reviewed the remaining records which revealed the need for immediate medical attention. Gayle was transferred to the dementia unit where tests concluded her thyroid and Alzheimer's medications clashed, resulting in medical crisis. Laura made the grueling decision to admit Gayle to a memory care facility where she lived only eight weeks before passing away at age 66.



Gayle and her dad, September 3, 2011

Laura never wanted anyone to go through what she and Gayle did and made it her mission to study everything about the disease. She returned to school and received her Master's in Social Work with a specialty in gerontology. She poured her love for Gayle into the GWF mission: to provide education, programs, services, and training for patients, families, caregivers, employers, and healthcare professionals impacted by early onset Alzheimer's disease.

The GWF has created programs and services that meet the unique needs and challenges encountered by those impacted by early onset Alzheimer's disease. Additionally, the GWF is working to create a comprehensive database of memory care services and programs in the community. There are wonderful resources available, but finding that information in the midst of receiving a devastating diagnosis, can often be difficult and fragmented. By creating this database, the GWF can help bridge the gap and help direct individuals and families that are dealing with early onset Alzheimer's disease to the appropriate services.

The GWF is committed to supporting people on this journey by providing a more streamlined approach to care and giving patients a voice. The GWF believes in honoring and respecting each individual and providing care and services based upon *their individual needs and backgrounds*. This concept of person-centered care focuses on:

- valuing the person living with early onset Alzheimer's disease and those who care for them;
- seeing and treating people as individuals;
- looking at the world from the perspective of the person with early onset Alzheimer's disease; and
- assist in providing a positive social environment in which all involved can experience well-being.

Gayle spent her life caring for others and believed that all living things should receive love and support. The GWF carries Gayle's legacy forward and will always focus on the needs of those living with this disease, as well as those who provide love, care, and support.