In his workshop, Alzheimer’s fades and the father I knew returns

With wood and sandpaper in hand, my father and I forge small, precious connections.

By Gail Strock
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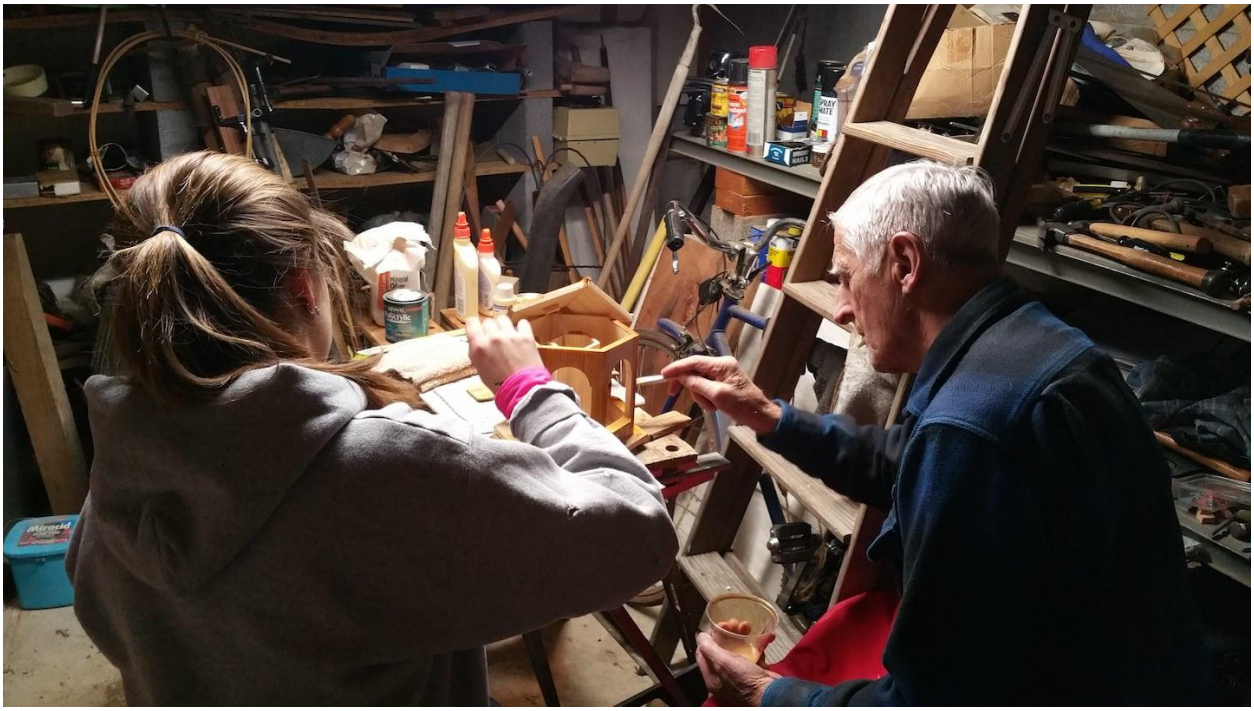

The writer's father, Glenn Selfridge, in the early stages of Alzheimer's, painted bird feeders with his granddaughter, Kate Abraham, in 2014. Gail Strock

My father runs his fingers across the wood plate he’s sanding. He holds it toward me, eyes sparkling.

“Is that ever smooth. Feel that.”

I lean forward and feel. He’s 91 years old and has Alzheimer’s. As an adult child, I want to hold on to this lucid connection as long as possible, so I return his expression — eyebrows raised, smile genuine — and say, “That *is* smooth!”

He goes back to sanding.

We’re in my father’s cluttered workshop, a familiar place where he still appreciates the beauty of wood and still correctly determines which side of the sandpaper to use. And I appreciate that he still recognizes my face and the sound of my voice.

We sit in the quiet, nearly knee to knee. Creased and crumpled sandpaper piles up on the corner of his worn workbench as we work. All around us sit well-worn tools with a decade of accumulated dust

sticking to them, not unlike the layers of plaque growing on my father's brain. He reaches for a rag to wipe away the fresh sawdust from the plate.

"Is that *ever* smooth. Feel that," he repeats. Together, we're learning this confusing new language called Alzheimer's. I reach forward and feel.

"Is it ready for polyurethane?" I can use this word because it's from his early furniture-making days.

"No, not yet."

I'm taken aback. He says it so decisively, so sure of himself. Then I chide myself. He has 70 years of experience making things out of wood. Why wouldn't he know when wood is ready for a finish? I watch as he pushes the sandpaper back and forth, going with the grain like the experienced woodworker that he is.

As my father's Alzheimer's progressed, his wood projects became simpler — from finely finished musical instruments to rough-cut barn-board bird feeders to nothing.

One evening during the nothing stage, we were sitting in his living room with me talking and him not. He sighed.

"Are you in pain, Dad?" No.

"Are you bored?" Yes.

It made sense. When he was younger, he built my mother's sewing machine cabinet, a drop-leaf table, and a walnut coffee table. In retirement, he made tone-sensitive Appalachian dulcimers and banjos. Throughout his life, he farmed fields, planted gardens, laid stone walls, and raised a family. Yes, he would be bored.

Not long after that conversation, I stopped by a large craft store and discovered unfinished wood pieces like plates, boxes, and birdhouses. In those pieces I saw not what my father *couldn't* do — run a power saw, measure twice and cut once, or miter the corners for a picture frame — but what he *could* do: sand. So I bought sandpaper and several beautifully grained, easy-to-handle 12-inch wooden dinner-sized decorative plates. And we returned to his workshop, to the smell of old oiled tools and sawdusty rags, to work with our hands, to sit and sand.

But the plates threw him.

"Is this a plate? What are we going to do with this?" He doesn't know, and it's not because of his Alzheimer's. I know what he's thinking: *Who ever heard of a plate made of wood?* He dusts it off, turns it over, and starts sanding again.

A wooden plate sanded and stained by Glenn Selfridge is on display at the author's home. Gail Strock

“Is this a plate? What are we going to do with this?” he says again.

“Cut a steak on it? Use it for decoration?” I suggest. He grimaces and I laugh. He’s never made anything as frivolous as a decoration.

We sand for a while. Then he surprises me.

“You know it’s ready [for polyurethane] when the sandpaper sounds different.”

I’m skeptical. Is this wisdom or wayward thinking? So I flip over the wood tray in my hand and sand until I hear the subtle change. My stomach flutters.

Oh, to know what he knows.

Gail Strock writes and edits from her home in Belleville, Pa.