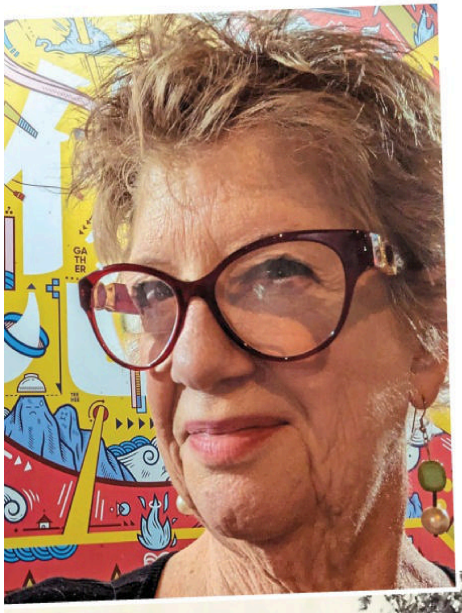
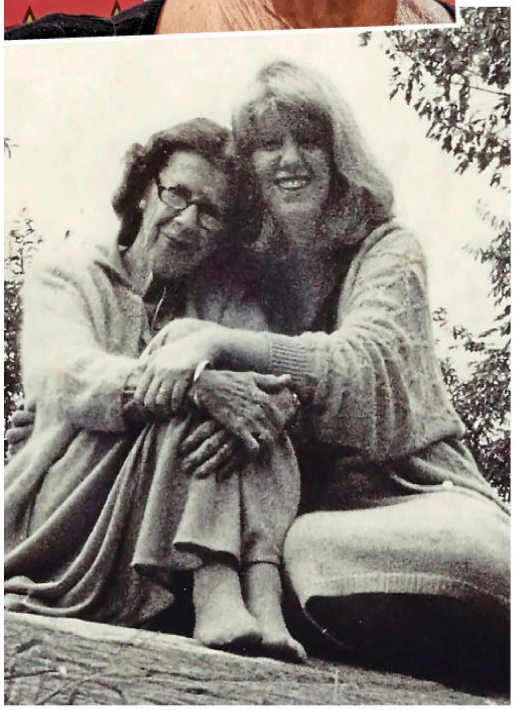
WW HEALING HEARTS

"Knowledge and hope give you power!"





After losing her mother to Alzheimer's disease, Molly McFadden, 72, is facing her own early-stage diagnosis with courage. Here, she shares her story…and what the future may bring.

The first time I scrambled my lines on stage, I knew something was wrong. If the words were "Sherwin-Williams," out came "William Sherman" or some other jumbled phrases. Fellow actors know losing a line here or there is normal, but this felt like a black hole swallowing me whole and I had to wait for it to pass before regaining my footing. Now, I know it was the early signs of Alzheimer's disease—the same cruel condition that took my mother.

Born in Denver, I spent 25 years in New York pursuing theater, singing and creativity. My husband and I built a life around art. I've always been a glass-half-full person, seeing challenges as opportunities—but this journey has been anything but easy.

My mother's diagnosis

In the 90s, when my mother began showing signs of Alzheimer's disease, our world shifted. It wasn't obvious at first. She became adept at dodging questions and hid her cognitive decline out of shame. Back then, resources and education about the disease were scarce, and she felt embarrassed. But delaying acceptance meant delaying care, which impacts the outcomes for many with dementia.

I paused my flourishing NYC career to move to Tennessee and become her primary caregiver for 12 years. I was on a grim, lonely path with little guidance. At the time, I promised I'd never put her in a nursing home—but Alzheimer's often breaks such promises. Her struggle inspired my art, helping me process the heartbreak and horror of this disease.

Top: Molly McFadden, 72, opens up about how knowledge is power. *Bottom:* Molly (right) with her mom (left) who also battled Alzheimer's

After she passed, we rebuilt our life in Michigan, filling nights with music and laughter at the jazz bistro my husband and I opened. Alzheimer's felt behind me—yet I always knew I might face the same fate.

Learning I was 'high risk'

A few years ago out of the blue, the Cleveland Clinic invited me to join a two-year study on how lifestyle affects people developing Alzheimer's. I was thrilled to help, but couldn't believe the irony that it was a random selection. I even asked my doctor if they told the Cleveland Clinic about me. They hadn't. In time, I knew it was no accident—I believe my mom had a part in sending me the letter.

The researchers asked if I wanted to know if I had the gene, and I did. Turns out, I was "high risk." I told myself I was fine…until the lines in my play started to scramble.

I went to my primary care doctor, explaining my concerns and my family history of Alzheimer's disease. Like many doctors, she dismissed my worries as stress or aging. But I knew something was wrong. I persisted, saying, "You're not hearing me." It's a difficult condition to diagnose—primary care physicians only get it right 60 percent of the time, so I pushed. A neurologist later did a brain scan, calling it a "typical 70-year-old brain," but I knew better.

When they did a spinal tap, the truth

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finally emerged—I had early symptoms of mild cognitive impairment (MCI) that could lead to Alzheimer's disease. It was as I'd suspected, and I had to determine what I'd do next, both logistically and emotionally. Now, I urge everyone worried about dementia or Alzheimer's to insist on scans—don't accept "it's menopause" or "it's just aging" as answers, especially if you have a family history or at risk.

Sweeping changes

My doctors prescribed a complete lifestyle overhaul. Gone are my days of indulging in breads and desserts. As someone who loves to cook, this has been an adjustment. I adopted an anti-inflammatory Mediterranean diet filled with lots of salads, beans and vegetables that is proven to boost neuron connections.

I walk and meditate each day. Science links stress to disease, so breathing deeply isn't just soothing—it lowers blood pressure and dementia risk.

Since February 2023, I've also been on Leqembi, an infusion medication that may peel away brain plaque affecting mental ability. I've had no side effects and continue research studies to monitor my progress. My doctors say I'm "buying time," though we can't predict how much.

Dispelling misconceptions

A diagnosis of MCI or Alzheimer's disease comes with a variety of misconceptions and fallacies. My theater colleagues have wondered if I'm going to forget my next lines. But I've proven I can adapt and persevere with new ways of remembering.

People also ask why I'd want to know about my risk. But I've learned that knowledge is power. I encourage others to fight for themselves, to get tested and not to be afraid. "Multiple genetic and environmental factors contribute [to Alzheimer's disease], almost half of which, if addressed early, might prevent end-stage symptoms—the progressive and relentless inability to make new memories, unintended repetitions, aphasia and functional loss—that in the past were considered the first point of intervention," says Rhonna Shatz, MD, director of Memory Care at University of Cincinnati Health. "Early detection has the power of prevention."

> **"Don't be afraid. Fight for yourself. Your body is telling yourself something, so listen."**

Facing my future

My husband, daughter and son-in-law are my support system. We've had open conversations about what might come, agreeing that if I need care, we'll address it directly. I'm not interested in assisted living—if I need a facility, we'll go straight there. I don't want my family to go through making the agonizing decisions I did with my mom.

I refused to let this diagnosis define me. I rewrote my play *Living on the Moon*, incorporating my journey. I started performing again, working with directors who understood my condition. Some nights were challenging—words would slip away—but I learned to trust myself, to keep going.

I also began giving TED talks, using my puppet, a representation of my mother, to share my story. My message: "Why give in when you can fight back?"

My next adventure? The Edinburgh Fringe Festival. My goal is to keep performing and writing as long as I can. But my husband did look relieved when I told him maybe we should work less and travel more. So, Paris, England, Ireland and other destinations are on our list of places to see. I want to visit friends and continue living a full life.

My advice: Lean on hope

To anyone facing similar challenges: Don't be afraid. Fight for yourself. Talk to doctors, get referrals and seek information. Your body is telling you something, so listen. Just as you'd immediately seek treatment for cancer, approach Alzheimer's the same way.

I'm not defined by this condition. I'm defined by my resilience, my art and my love for life. Some days are harder than others, but I keep breathing, keep moving forward. There's hope, always hope.

—as told to Alexandra Frost

Courtesy of Molly McFadden

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