

January, 2004

The Forgetting

“Ronald Reagan was never particularly admired for his memory. But in the late 1980s and early 90s, he slowly began to lose his grip on ordinary function. In 1992, three years after leaving the White House, Reagan's forgetting became impossible to ignore. He was eighty-one. Both his mother and older brother had experienced senility, and he had demonstrated a mild forgetfulness in the late years of his presidency. Like many people who eventually suffer from the disease, Reagan may have had an inkling for some time of what was to come...”

“By 1992 the signs of Reagan's illness were impossible to ignore. At the conclusion of his medical exam in September, as the New York Times would later report, Reagan looked up at his doctor of many years with an utterly blank face and said ‘What am I supposed to do next?’ This time, the doctor knew that something was very wrong.”

-- From, The Forgetting: Alzheimer's Portrait of an Epidemic,
by David Shenk, First Anchor Paperback, January 2003.

David Shenk's book serves as a biography of Alzheimer's disease. Beginning with Alios Alzheimer's description of his patient Auguste D, his book discusses other famous (Ralph Waldo Emerson, Willem De Kooning) and not so famous patients. The book also chronicles the furious search by Alzheimer's researchers for a treatment. The book draws from scientific, historical, religious, and artistic sources in a clear and compelling way.

The Forgetting will also be featured in an hour and a half high-profile special broadcast nationally on PBS, January 21, 2004 from 7:30 to 9pm. The goal of the broadcast is to help Americans better understand and cope with the disease. Accompanying the show will be a national educational effort backed by the Alzheimer's Association. Individuals will be organizing house parties to promote discussion after the film. If you are interested in hosting one of these house parties you can sign up on line at <http://www.alz.org/Advocates/forgetting.html> or send your name and address to Mike Splaine, Alzheimer's Association, 1319 F Street NW Suite 710, Washington, DC or fax 202-393-2109.

Local television coverage following the PBS special will be presented by WMHT in Albany. The program, which will air immediately following the PBS special, will be hosted by Benita Zahn. The format is a live call-in show (from 9:00-10:00 PM on January 21) that will allow viewers to call in questions to Alzheimer's disease experts who will be in the studio.

David Shanks points out what clinicians and researchers working in the

field know all too well: that Alzheimer's disease affects 4 million people in the United States today, but by 2050 the disease will reach epidemic proportions, affecting more than 15 million people in the United States. The hope is that the PBS special followed by local events will help raise awareness about the disease and help the Alzheimer's Association reach its goal of 1 billion dollars to support research.

Paul Solomon, PhD, is founder and clinical director of The Memory Clinic in Bennington, Vt. and a professor of psychology at Williams College. For information about The Memory Clinic, call 802-447-1409 or toll free 866-646-3362.