

## Special Care for Alzheimer's Patients

By Lynn Wasnak

Susan Gilster is a woman who smiles when she meets a challenge. She smiles often, because every day brings something new to her position as executive director of the Alois Alzheimer Center, Cincinnati.

The center opened in 1986 as the nation's first specialized care facility for patients with Alzheimer's Disease, or dementia. Gilster, now a licensed long-term health care administrator, has been responsible from day one for the center's organization and program content.

Alzheimer's Disease is the most common cause of senility. It is a progressive illness that destroys brain cells, causing gradual, irreversible loss of memory and function. It affects approximately 2.5 million people in the U.S. today, and claims about 120,000 lives annually—the fourth leading cause of death among adults. To date, there is no cure.

Gilster successfully launched several startup projects since her nursing career began in 1975 at Cleveland Clinic's cardiac intensive care unit. She helped establish an open-heart surgery unit in Venezuela, built a pediatric nutritional support program at Children's Hospital Medical Center, Cincinnati, and served as district manager for Abbott Laboratories' home care division.

“When I was approached about the Alzheimer's project, I'd had some experience with the disease in my husband's family. Over a 12-year period, I saw what it does not only to the affected person, but to the family. Many families are totally consumed by this disease,” Gilster explains.

The Alois Alzheimer Center is privately owned, and located on seven acres in the residential community of Greenhills. It accommodates up to 82 live-in patients, and offers both day care and respite care to assist families. Unlike some facilities that are restricted to specific stages of the disease, patients admitted to Alois Alzheimer Center will be cared for throughout the course of their illness.

Gilster established the center with four main missions: to provide quality clinical care for patients, to provide support and counseling for families, to conduct and participate in research leading to a better understanding of the disease and to educate the lay and medical communities.

Gilster is pleased with the Center's progress. “I think we've made a valuable contribution to families and patients,” she says. “People may become much more social after they arrive. They start doing things again, and develop friendships and relationships

with each other and the staff. Our goal is to build their self-esteem. All the things you and I need, they need too. It's a matter of finding out what the person can do."

She and her staff present numerous educational programs to regional and national groups of 15 to 500. "We do this to touch on the myths and fallacies around the disease process. Is it contagious? Not that we know of. Is it a normal part of aging? We're pretty sure it's not. And we remind people that a physician should review a problem as soon as possible, because there are reversible conditions that have similar symptoms," she explains.

Last fall the Alois staff's caregiving experiences were presented at the Fifth Annual conference of Alzheimer's Disease International, in Dublin, Ireland. Gilster also encourages use of the Center as a training resource for regional health-care professionals.

To spread the message even further, every April the Center presents a special program for nursing assistants.

Gilster's total staff includes about 100 full-time and part-time workers. Her management style is participatory, and staffers are included in decision-making processes that involve their work.

Some research is sponsored internally, funded by speaker's honorariums and family donations. Other projects are initiated by the University of Cincinnati's Alzheimer Research Center.

Although the Center has underwritten a variety of educational programs to date, Gilster wants the education and research functions of the organization to be self-supporting. "We are setting up a not-for-profit foundation for education and internal research funding. Our programs aren't very expensive. We just want to cover expenses."

Gilster would welcome contributions from the business community. "The more resources available in the foundation, the more research we can conduct," she says.