

May 3, 2004

**Testimony of Mrs. Verna Hightower  
Before  
the House of Representatives Appropriations Committee  
&  
House of Representatives Alzheimer's Caucus**

Good Morning Mr. Chairman, members of the Appropriations Committee and members of the Alzheimer's Caucus. I am pleased to speak before you today on a matter very near and dear to my heart, my late husband Bob Hightower.

In September of 1961 when I first met Bob, life changed for me as I once knew it. Blissfully in love, only 1 year later in 1962 we married and began a family of our own.

Bob was a loving husband and father. He was by profession a distinguished playwright, receiving an award from the National Endowment of the Arts. As a Professor of Drama he was widely respected among his peers, students and within the community.

In 1999, life again changed. However, this time it wasn't as blissful. I started to notice changes in Bob's speech, memory and behavior. Normally articulate, he stumbled for words, forgetting commonly used words. Additionally, he was often paranoid. As a result, I urged him to see a doctor and even made appointments for him. However, he denied everything, going so far as to canceling his appointments.

Finally, and only after irreversible decline, we visited a neurologist. The neurologist determined that Bob had a series of mini strokes that resulted in dementia.

By April 2001, Bob's condition spiraled downward. Each symptom magnified, the paranoia, the forgetfulness and the concentration abilities. He needed more care and supervision, so I quit my job.

Initially, I felt alone until I found help at the Philadelphia Corporation on Aging. There I was able to receive some assistance through the Pennsylvania Family Caregiver Support Program. Due to our modest income, comprised of social security and Robert's pension, we were unable to qualify for any additional services offered through PCA.

PCA suggested that I join one of the local support groups sponsored by the Alzheimer's Association. I joined the group at HomeLink in Germantown. This is where I truly became connected with other families, giving and receiving support, learning more about dementia and gaining helpful caregiving information that ultimately reduced some of the physical and emotional stress for both Bob and myself.

It also through this support group that I first learned of the AoA program administered by the Alzheimer's Association. Bob was one of the initial participants approved for the

program in July of 2003. That very same month we started to receive services, including adult day care twice a week at Senior Care of Chestnut Hill.

Bob's participation in the program was limited as he passed away on October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2003. However, I am here today to emphasize the importance of this program. While I no longer need its wonderful services, my fellow support group members and many other families experiencing Alzheimer's disease or some other form of dementia are in desperate need of it.

Unlike any other program to date, the AoA program provides families with direct respite services, like the adult day Bob used. There are other opportunities for participants to receive various in-home services, including personal care such as bathing and feeding, housekeeping and overnight respite for qualified participants.

These services are invaluable to any caregiver, providing us with a chance to take care of ourselves – just get out. Sometimes it was a trip to the grocery store. Maybe a visit to the doctor or just alone time to relax, read the newspaper or a book. Time off from the full time responsibilities of caregiving results in increased caregiver well being which directly and positively impacts the quality of care provided to the family member with dementia.

Bob left lasting impressions everywhere he went and upon almost everyone he met. In this year's Black Theater Festival, one of Bob's plays will be performed, a true testament to his creative ability. To this day, whenever I run into Bob's former students they always speak fondly of him. Throughout our 41 years of marriage not one day went by without him leaving a mark on my heart, my mind and my soul.

It is the Alzheimer's Association that offers care and support to individuals along this sometimes long and very lonely journey. It is the Alzheimer's Association that has the compassion to care and expels the leadership to conquer. As leaders in Pennsylvania, all of you can make a mark in the lives of Pennsylvanians with dementia as well as their families. Ladies and Gentlemen of the legislature, I plead with you to support the Alzheimer's Association.

Thank you for your time and continued support.