Patient Zero: How 80-year-old Judy Benjamin Reclaimed Her Brain After an Alzheimer’s Diagnosis Transcript

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Diagnosis and a Ray of Hope

I just didn't think I could go on. I just knew what was ahead. I could see the writing on the wall, and I was not up for it. There's this incredible doctor out on the West Coast.

He believes that his theoretical approach will reverse the symptoms. And she said, I want you to go out and talk to him. And I said, I'm in it. Ready.

I'm going. And so she called Dr. Bredesen, and he agreed. to Sydney and I flew out from New York to San Francisco. I didn't know at the time that all of his work had been with mice, so here I am, the first human, but it didn't matter to me because it was a ray of hope.

Welcome to this episode of the Think Well, Age Well podcast. I am your host, Dr. Heather Sandison, and I am absolutely thrilled to have the privilege of introducing you today to Judy Benjamin.

She is an absolute legend in my world at 67 years old. Judy received a diagnosis that really profoundly changed her life. It was a diagnosis of Alzheimer's.

And she had watched her mother battle the disease for two decades, so she knew what was at stake. But Judy, as you'll learn, is not the type of person to accept something like that.

So instead of just accepting this downward trajectory, she radically transformed her life, her diet, her lifestyle. And she pursued Dr. Bredesen to learn about what he was learning in basically on the bench in his scientific exploration.

She has become his now legendary Patient Zero. And through the Bredesen Protocol, Judy has not only stabilized her own cognitive decline, but she's reclaimed cognitive health and transformed her own personal experience into fueling this desire to help others achieve what she has.

Judy has become a RICO-trained coach with Apollo Health and has launched Access Longevity, where she supports individuals and families who are navigating cognitive decline themselves.

Now at 80, Judy has taken this message of hope literally across the country. She has just completed a three, over 3000 mile walk from San Diego here with us to St.

Augustine, Florida. And she was doing this to bring awareness to dementia and Alzheimer's and the hope more than anything that we have to show the world that the brain truly can heal.

and that it can stay healthy, that aging can be vibrant, and that it is never too late to rewrite the end of your story. So Judy, welcome. I'm so delighted to have you here.

Thank you so much for joining me. It's my pleasure. Thank you so much for having me. I want to go back to that day you got the diagnosis. Having watched your mother's journey, what came up for you?

What was that like for you to have someone say, you have Alzheimer's?

Early Symptoms and Meeting Dr. Bredesen

Well, actually, it wasn't a big surprise to me because I knew the symptoms very, very well, having watched my own

mother go through this from the early times when she first got diagnosed.

So it was very scary for me. And I think I put myself in a state of denial in the beginning. because I would say, oh, well, you know, I'm too tired or too stressed.

But finally, when I had no way to deny the fact that I was losing my memory and had lost a great deal of it and I got a diagnosis, I was devastated. Like I think everyone, I can't imagine anyone ever getting that diagnosis and not being devastated.

So I was certainly there with so many others and it didn't make it any easier for me because You know, I just didn't want to put my family through what I know that my sister and I went through and watching our mom decline, decline, decline.

So I was quite desperate and I confess that to one of my best friends that I just didn't think I could go on. I just knew what was ahead. I could see the writing on the wall and I was not up for it.

And luckily, she knew Dr. Dale Bredesen and she knew him as a researcher because that's what he is, that's what he was 100% of the time at that time. But she said, look, there's this incredible doctor out on the West Coast.

He's doing wonderful research with Alzheimer's and he believes that his theoretical approach will reverse the symptoms. And she said, I want you to go out and talk to him.

And I said, I'm in it. You know, I'm ready. I'm going. And so she called Dr. Bredesen and he agreed to see me and I flew out from New York to San Francisco.

I didn't know at the time that all of his work had been with mice, so here I am, the first human. But it didn't matter to me because it was a ray of hope.

And I think that is really all about my message to everyone is that ray of hope that There are things that we can do. There are things that I did. And my mission is to share that with as many people as possible.

We share that mission. Take us back, I guess, even before that diagnosis. What were the signs? What were the things that told you that you might be on the same trajectory as your mom, that something wasn't right?

Well, I think it actually started quite far back, but one thing I did notice that in my work, which was highly technical and stressful, I worked in international development and I did a lot of, I did some research, but I also did a lot of sort of investigative reporting going into war conflict affected areas like Afghanistan and Yemen, places like that.

And I would conduct interviews with local people, and then I would create detailed reports and come back to Washington and deliver those reports to various government agencies and UN agencies.

And I found that my attention on the detail was really difficult for me to keep focused. And I, in other words, my executive functioning really started to go downhill.

pretty quickly. And again, I made excuses for it that, well, I was too tired, too stressed or whatever. But then when I started forgetting basic things like my phone number, my social security number, getting lost, you know, when I was driving in very familiar places, and I always have had an excellent sense of direction.

You know, I'm a licensed pilot. I know about reading maps. I know about compass headings. But I just would get completely turned around and I panicked when that happened.

And I think, Heather, in that state of panic, when you get gripped by this fear, you kind of underneath it, some little voices telling you, aha, you're down that slippery slope that your mom was on.

And I got to the point where I had to face that there was something really basically wrong with my memory and with

my brain. And that led you eventually to Dr.

Bredesen. What was that like, the in-between? How long did it take you to find him? And then what was it like when you met him? What did he tell you to do?

What was your takeaway from that initial conversation? I mean, it's a great question, that part of it, too, but I'll just say that the length of time is really hard to put your finger on because, as I said, it was something that was occurring and getting worse as time went on, but I just noticed that I was less able to complete assignments on time.

And that's something that's really important in that line of work. You're only given a certain amount of time to complete everything. And that was a huge struggle for me, really, really difficult.

So I would say that from when I started noticing symptoms, it was over a year anyway, maybe even two years where I I started to pay attention to the symptoms.

And then, once I decided and heard about Dr. Bredesen, what I did was immediately go out to meet with him, and he very generously offered his time. And at the time, he was at the Bucks Institute.

And I'll never forget the day I went out there, because I did fly out, and I rented a car, and I drove up to Mirren County. And it was just this beautiful day, you know, the sun was shining and that area is so beautiful anyway, all the vineyards and everything.

Testing, Supplements, and Lifestyle Changes

And I drove up that hill, that sort of a winding hill up to this beautiful building and waited nervously for the assistant to take me to Dr. Bredesen's office.

And of course, when I went in, he's sitting there with screens on the wall and all kinds of papers tucked on the wall and everything. And he started to, first of all, he welcomed me and he explained that he didn't have a clinical practice and he was not really seeing patients, but that he had agreed to do my friend a favor.

And he almost turned her down, by the way. I later found this out that He almost just said no. So thank goodness he didn't. So anyway, he started to explain his theory.

And as now I understand it, because I can understand things and explanations, but I was sitting there sort of wide-eyed and scribbling notes furiously, which I think I still have that book of notes.

I'm pretty sure I do. because I couldn't remember really what he was actually saying. But when he finished this talk, and we spent about two and a half hours together discussing, and of course he asked me a lot of questions about my diet, my exercise, what my symptoms were, history of my mom and her case, my family history.

It wasn't only my mom. my mother had brothers who, all of them, had the same thing. They all passed away from Alzheimer's. You know, four of them. And your APOE status?

What is your APOE status? I'm a 3.3. And I must say I was shocked about that, but I now have learned that the area where my family lived was extremely toxic.

It was surrounded by these manufacturing places that dumped all of their chemicals into the three rivers that were in that particular community for years and years.

And I'm sure that affected the water supply and everything else because they have a very high incidence of Alzheimer's in that air still to this day and cancer.

So I'm convinced that it was a very heavily toxic in that in that sense. No, but because I don't have APOE and I

don't know what my mom had because in those days we didn't look at it.

We didn't know about it. And she's been gone now 20 years. So that's how long, you know, that she hasn't. And I went to see Dr. Bredesen, it's been 14 years ago.

So a little over the 15 in the spring in April. So it was, yeah, it was really something, but that was a fantastic visit. And then what I paid attention to what I did write down very carefully were the recommendations.

And we started out with, okay, let's try supplements. Let's try some supplements. And of course, the recommendation to go back and get tested, you know, get blood work done and get some scans done.

I agree to do that. I'm just curious, what supplements did he recommend you start with at that stage 15 years ago? Well, this is, yes, it was basic, very basic.

So I took curcumin, turmeric, and ashwagandha, citicoline, and Bacopa. And the B complex. And later we added things as my blood work revealed that, you know, I was deficient in D3.

I was very deficient in B complex. found out later when I did my DNA and looked at it that I don't methylate. And so it's very hard for me to get rid of toxins.

And I also discovered that I was very much exposed to mold. I had been living in a beautiful old house, but it had mold in the basement and mold in the attic.

And I'd also worked in communities and places around the world that had visible mold. I mean, you'd see the mold on the wall. Liberia, I'll never forget, I was in Liberia and the room I was staying in had these big designs of mold on the wall.

So I know that I had been heavily exposed to it. And then when I became, when I was tested, I had a very high level of mycotoxin also. Did you guys discuss diet and exercise and sleep and stress management at that point, or was it more focused on kind of the nuts and bolts of testing and supplementation, kind of nutrients?

I believe, as I recall, we didn't go into as much detail on those issues as we now know they're all related, and sort of the Bredesen 7 includes all of those.

We did talk about stress and that stress was a very negative thing. We talked about mold and exposure to toxins. And I did talk about, I did mention exercise because I've always kind of been interested in exercise.

And even I played sports in high school, came from a family that we were very oriented to do sports. So it wasn't that I was a couch potato or anything like that.

But we didn't connect those dots particularly. I think what we did do, what Dr. Bredesen seemed to be more interested in, was what's going on in the chemistry in the brain and why that's important to supplement the supplements that he recommended.

certainly talk about food and getting rid of junk food. And we didn't really, I don't think at that time we were as focused on ultra processing of food and how all of that chemistry is so bad for you.

But sugar was, you know, sugar diet sodas, which I was addicted to. I mean, I would have Pepsi Diet Coke all the time. I mean, several per day. And artificial sweeteners.

I also, like a lot of people, went through that period of time when everything was anti-fat, low-fat, you know, don't have oils, don't have fat. So my body was really starved from a lot of the nutrients that I really needed to keep my brain healthy.

So I did go back and cleaned out my kitchen cabinets and just essentially threw away everything that was

processed or had additives in it and started just shopping for real food, you know, buy vegetables and fruit and make it yourself, you know.

And so that was a big change for me. I also had a very big problem sleeping. I had bragged about, oh, I don't need very much sleep. You know, I can get up way on three or four hours a night.

And there were many times I would be working on a paper and I would just tell all-nighters for two nights in a row. And I can remember that horrible feeling, almost staggering around, just so sleep deprived.

But even when I went to bed, you know, I'd stay up super late and get up early. So I was getting very little sleep. And that was one of the hardest things that I had to change about my life because it was such an ingrained habit that I was just used to not sleeping very much.

So I've worked on it. I found out I have sleep apnea. So I had to get, I had to go to have a sleep study done and I have a CPAP so that I can breathe properly.

So my poor brain had no fat and had very little oxygen. So, I mean, it's no wonder that, that I was so deficient, you know? Can you remember the moment when you felt confident, like, okay, all right, this is actually working.

And what was that like? Well, I do remember that when I came back home from my trip to visit with Dr. Bredesen, I felt a sense of there's hope. And it was like a huge relief.

I felt like this albatross was off my back and I could work toward that. And I was so dedicated to following whatever he said. I even said something really silly now when I think about it, I said, I will eat dirt if you tell me to eat dirt.

It's like, I'll do anything. And I tell my coaching clients that sometimes. And of course, they laugh and they get a kick out of it. But I said, the point is, I was so committed not to go down the path that my mom went down that I was willing to follow the instructions and be compliant.

And that is, to me, compliancy is so important. You can't keep doing the same things and expect a different result. It just doesn't work that way. So I came back and I had a fire in my belly, let's say.

I really was very impressed with him and the way he spoke about his theory and his kindness. And I was really determined that I would come back and do it.

I came back and I just followed it and I didn't I didn't pester him or call him all the time or anything. I just said, okay, I'm changing my life. I enrolled in yoga classes and I showed up every day for yoga class.

I took one of those unlimited monthly programs and the people at the studio said, well, you know, you're here every day. Why don't you just take our yoga teacher training?

I said, well, okay, I'll take it. I'm not going to be, probably I'm not going to teach for a living, but I'll do it. So I had, it was very helpful though for me.

to deal with stress and to deal with the lack of focus because my brain was really unwell and I had trouble focusing and staying on the same thought. And doing yoga and especially the style that I did which involved meditation and centering really was a very important part of my my therapeutic approach and healing.

And it was about, it was a little over a month or so, I remember walking through my house, it was a Sunday morning, and I just suddenly felt, I think I've got my brain back, you know, and I was going around the house kind of dancing saying, I think it's, I'm getting my brain back, because I started to be able to of focus and obviously it took a lot longer than that.

It does take a long time and things come and go, you know, I'd get clarity and then I'd wake up another morning and I would just have this brain fog about, you know, What am I supposed to do today?

Or what can I do? But that became less and less. And I think that's the key to getting better is after it was a little over a month that I had followed everything precisely that Dr.

Brain Fog to Recovery

Bredesen told me to do. And I woke up one Sunday morning. It was a sunny day. I was walking through my house. And I suddenly had a sense of clarity. And I just was sort of dancing around.

I said, think I've got my brain back. You know, this is great. And I actually called Dr. Bredesen. It was a weekend. I called him and he answered. And it's funny because he tells a story like this.

He was like calling out the phone. I think his wife was sitting there and he said, It worked. It's like almost a surprise to him. I'm sure it wasn't a surprise, but he was so thrilled that it did.

And so I wanted to share that with him that I was better. I mean, I've been in that position of being like, really? It worked. I mean, it's just so ingrained in so many of us, right, to have this idea that there's nothing you can do.

As patients, as providers, like that's what we're told and we have been for so long. And so those, I can't imagine like him having spent his entire career focused on this.

It'd be like, wait, what? It actually worked. Like having, I'm sure he had been hopeful so many times before that something would work and it didn't. And so to hear like a real live human have that experience, I mean, I'm just elated imagining him in that position.

Judy, you mentioned that you, you know, there were some words I want to pick out of what you said. You were committed. You were determined. If you tell me to eat dirt, I will do it.

Dr. Bredesen and I now, I have the privilege of meeting with him a couple of times a week to review patients and discuss things. And something that comes up over and over again, you said, if you don't do it, it doesn't work.

If you keep doing the same things, and I talk to patients about this all the time, if they are pushing back about changing their diet or exercise or sleep, or I won't wear a CPAP or I can't swallow any pills, just like, well, if you don't do it, it doesn't work.

If you keep doing the same things, the trajectory looks like this. It's pretty predictable. And when I chat with Dr. Brettison over and over again, what comes up is the people who are committed and determined and who do it, it works for.

And I think you and I both have this desire to say like, okay, the early adopters were that personality type. Like I know in the first survivors group that you all have with Lucy and there's a handful of you, you all are that type A determined, committed personality type.

And so as we move forward and as this becomes more mainstream, the goal is to get the access to people who don't necessarily have that personality type, right?

And I'm curious, like, how do you see that translating? Like, what do you think it'll take to get someone who's maybe not quite as determined or not quite as committed to get the benefits?

You know, it's such an important question, and it's one that I have struggled with as a coach, because that's what we want to do. And I know as a doctor, that's what you want to do, is we want to see improvement.

We want people to get well, or we wouldn't be doing this, right? you know, of course. So I've tried different techniques with my clients. I've tried, you know, kind of the scary thing of really, and it is scary, you know, some of these people, I must say, are not people who've had a close relative that they've watched and seen like I had with my mom or like a lot of people have, a lot of my clients will have somebody that they've experienced it.

People who've seen it so close up like that tend to be more committed. That's the first, so with that theory in mind, I recommend sometimes people who've never been exposed to it but they've been diagnosed themselves to go and volunteer at an Alzheimer's unit at a memory center and spend some time volunteering and watching and seeing and working with patients.

And I had a couple of people actually do that and they said it was just life-changing because they I don't know, they blocked that possibility of what will happen if you advance in Alzheimer's.

I imagine it puts the fear of God in people. Well, yeah, exactly. And of course, not everyone is going to do that. So the other thing that I've tried, maybe a more softer, more gentle approach, is I will try to zero in on specific areas to improve first.

If they just refuse, I had one person who lives in New York, she said, I'm a New Yorker, I'm not giving up bread. I can't give up bread because I live in New York and I love bread and we have the best bread in the world.

So the Italians might challenge them in the French on that but anyway, and so we work on other parts other areas or I very gently try to encourage like a person who says that to try some of the newer products that are out that are gluten-free and And for me, I know gluten was really something that I had to give up because just the whole idea of eating wheat and the response I got with gluten.

So there are some, over the years, they've improved the recipes and the things. And I might even suggest that somebody tries a sourdough, a true sourdough bread because it has the fermentation And sometimes that is a little bit easier on the system.

But we'll focus on making improvements in other areas. And I think as people see the protocol working, they are much more inclined to sort of get together with everything else.

So that's at least what I'm trying now is that approach. What inspired you to sort of pay all this forward and become a recode trained coach? I mean, I can imagine, but I want to hear it from you.

Like, what was that process like going from patient to provider? Well, it was never in the beginning my intention. I didn't think about doing this because, you know, I, I just didn't figure that that was something I was going to do.

But what happened, what started to happen is people I knew heard about my new friends who knew me saw the changes. and my improvement and so they would start asking me can you talk to my aunt can you talk to my husband my uncle whatever and and help them and tell them what you did and then I realized I'm a person I like credentials and I thought well you know I don't really haven't had any training in coaching, so I signed up for a couple of coaching programs and I looked about the National Board Certification, which I am certified in, that what are the requirements, and of course they have very specific, pretty detailed, you have to go to schools that offer this, and so I signed up for one of those selected programs.

And I spent about a year, I think it was, yeah, a year preparing for them. I did one that was a sort of combination brain yoga program that was on their list of, I was going to do the IFM, but there was an issue with the timing of it and I wasn't able to do it, so I was able to do the other one that I can send you that, you know, I can give you that link if you want on the one, but it was just a smaller program, but they were approved and it really worked for me.

And then of course I took, I also took a study program to take the test because the exam is not easy. you know, you go into a room full of computers, you can't take even a watch in or a glass of water, you know, you just like sit there for like four hours and click answers.

And of course, it's not just brain health, but it's on, you know, diabetes, weight loss, high blood pressure, all of those things. But I'm very grateful for that information because it's so important with cognitive decline and Alzheimer's that there's so many issues that can be problematic.

Becoming a ReCODE Coach

And so then because I knew about Apollo Health and I knew about that they had the program, I also applied and took their training program. And I also took the one for practitioners.

I took both the training program for coaches and then for practitioners because I wanted to kind of know what do the doctors get trained. And it's very similar.

Many of the lectures are really the same. But, and so before I knew it, I'm board certified and recode certified in coaching. And that's been important to me.

I think it's important also for people to have confidence that you have training and that you kind of know what you're doing. Yeah, you know, it's funny because part of the reason I, I mean, I would say it wasn't the primary reason, but when I thought about treating dementia patients, you know, in the naturopathic world, a lot of the gut specialists, like they get into it because they have gut issues.

People who focus on autoimmune disease, they personally have been through an autoimmune disease journey, and so they focus on that, and it gives them some legitimacy, right?

Like, yeah, there's the credentials, like you mentioned, but having the personal experience also helps, and they can relate to their patients in this really meaningful way.

And when I was thinking about supporting people with dementia, I was like, well, nobody is going to want a doctor who's had dementia. And here you are.

You've become a provider who's had a diagnosis of Alzheimer's who is absolutely thriving. I mean, this is that. You have credentials. I feel like what gives you the most legitimacy that would make me want to work with you as a patient more than anything is that you have successfully navigated this and been through it.

Been through something really, really hard and come out the other side stronger and healthier and better. Well, I mean, I have to agree with you because I have many of the people I work with specifically want to work with me because they know I have been down that road and I've tried so many things and, you know, gone through the disappointments of it and also the successes.

It's not that you can paint a rosy picture that everything you do just click, click, click, everything works. I mean, it doesn't, you know, it's complicated.

It doesn't happen like that. So I think that that does help, although I must say that there are so many wonderful coaches who've never had a problem and they've had really excellent training and they are very compassionate for other people.

So it's certainly not a requirement, but I do think that it has been helpful for me. in the sense that, and I'm a researcher by training, you know, I did my doctorate in medical anthropology, looking at world health issues and epidemiology and all of that.

So I've always had the curiosity for reading scientific papers and looking, I mean, I read two this morning. I'm very interested now in the gut biosis and dysbiosis and how it affects the brain and the whole microbiomes and all of that.

So I'm really trying to learn more about that. How exciting. I mean, you're a lifelong learner. I'm curious, is that one of the patterns, or what are the patterns, maybe more generally, what are the patterns that you see across your clients who get the best results?

We've talked about commitment, and we've talked about dedication, and we've talked about this kind of lifelong learning and interest, and these being patterns that probably supported you in getting great outcomes.

But are there other things? Well, I know I have a few clients that I've worked with for quite a while. And the thing

that I do see consistently is, first of all, high motivation.

And it's almost a personality type, a person who wants to achieve, and they want to have success, and they're willing to pay the price. And I say that meaning, you've got to give up some things that maybe you don't want to give up.

It's, I say this like there's no free lunch, you know, you've really got to be willing. And I try to say, look at the alternative, you know, for people who aren't as easily convinced, you can go down this road, which is going to lead you to getting better.

Or you can go down this road, which is going to lead you right down the abyss into darkness. I mean, I just think there's so much scientific evidence and proof of people we know, people we've seen, family members, and so forth.

You know, I did want to comment that my walk, you know, across the country was just unbelievable. It was so fantastic from San Diego to St. Augustine.

But what was amazing is everybody I met, and I can only think of maybe two exceptions when I would tell people what I'm doing, because the first question is, why are you doing this?

And when I explained it was bring attention to effective treatments for Alzheimer's for reversing cognitive decline that I went through and I never promise I never say cure because I think that's that's a little bit dangerous because we're not promising a cure but what I what I got by reversing and doing away with my symptoms put me back to being a normal functioning person.

I'll buy that any day of the week, whether you want to diagnose me with Alzheimer's or not. I mean, I am a highly functional person and I don't have the issues of memory loss.

So it was like everybody, as soon as I told them, you know, my grandmother just died from that or my or this or, you know, wanting more information. And, and of course we know how much it's in our society and in the world, but just to having people, and they wanted to hug me, you know, can I hug you?

And now I'm responding to so many emails from people, emails that I get, wanting to know information. I think that's the hard part is, what do we do? How can we convey this?

And of course, I always recommend, I recommend Dr. Bredesen's book, I recommend your book, which you did, congratulations, you did a wonderful a job with that book, but there are, there's information out there for people, but sometimes people just don't want to hear that you want them to read a book, if you know what I mean.

You know, it's like too hard when you're struggling with your memory. It's not something that's going to be easy for you to do. So the walk, I just am so tickled and excited that we get to have this conversation as you've completed this.

So most people turning 80, they think about a cake, maybe even a gluten-free cake. But no, you got on a pair of walking shoes, cross-country walking shoes, literally.

How did you arrive at this idea and then actually execute on it? You know, it kind of just came to me, and it wasn't even that far in advance. I was looking at when I ordered my first barefoot shoes was maybe in September before I started the walk in April of 2025. I started April 5th.

And I just thought, you know, I need to do something. I really wanted to do something to call more attention to Dr. Bredesen's protocol. And I talk about it all the time with my clients, but I needed to draw, get people's attention.

And I did it more so that it would just give me an opportunity to talk to more people. And fortunately, we had some good press coverage. We didn't, I would have loved more, but we had a TV stations that covered it.

We had local newspapers that came out and walked with me. And that was, that was just so neat. Radio stations and podcasts such as. such as what you're doing.

So it did give me the opportunity to do that. And that was one part of it. The other part of it was, I don't know, I just needed to know that I could do something that was kind of extraordinary, you know.

And now I turn to 81. in June, so midway, and not even midway, right after, a couple months after I started, I turned 81. And I thought, you know, I want to be an example for people, not to say that if you're 81, you should try to walk across the country, but that you can do things that you never thought you could do.

And one thing is fighting this battle with a diagnosis of Alzheimer's. You know, you people, you can do it. And the results are different for different people.

You know, we can't guarantee a specific result, but I firmly believe it is my personal belief that if you follow the protocol, you are going to get better in many ways.

I mean, your blood pressure, your heart rate, all these things are going to get better. And when that happens, your whole body gets better. So I found, I mean, for me, I walked anywhere from eight hours to 12 hours a day.

When the during the summer when the days were longer and I had more daylight I could walk later and it was a pleasure you know I was just a joyful thing to meet all these people and I mean I'm having a little bit of challenge to reintegrate into normal life.

I'm so curious about the logistics. I did the Camino de Santiago years ago, and I walked for 35 days across Spain, as many people have, but there are these albergues.

The whole thing is designed for people who are on this pilgrimage. But walking from San Diego to Florida, it's not designed for that. Like, just talk me through the logistics.

How long did it take you? Okay, you're walking eight to 12 hours a day. Where did you stay? Did you know where you were staying every night? Did you carry all your stuff or were there were there people helping you with that?

I just am fascinated.

Walking Across the Country for Awareness

Yeah, well, that's a great question, too, because it's certainly not planned out. I mean, in some places, it's really hard to walk because there are these long bridges that have no shoulder.

It's like the white line to the white line. And, you know, you got to take your life at risk to walk across them because the trucks and cars are sort of coming at you.

So that part was a little scary. But I did have a support vehicle. I had a recreational vehicle, a small RV, and I had drivers who, one driver, and they rotated a little bit.

I ended up having five different drivers over the period of seven and a half months. But they would drive, I'd start in the morning and they would catch up to me.

We were in touch by phone and sometimes by walkie talkie when the phones weren't working. in the areas that they didn't have phone service. But I would say, OK, I'm fine, or I don't need you to catch up.

But I'd usually walk for two or three hours in the morning. Then the vehicle would catch up, and I would replenish my water supply. And if I wanted to have a snack or something, And then I'd walk another two hours and stop for lunch and we would prepare food in the RV.

Luckily, I had a food sponsor, Trifecta, and they delivered once a week, they delivered organic keto, mostly keto, not 100% keto, but I tried my best to stay in a ketogenic, but I needed to have more, I burned a lot walking that much.

So I'm not normally used to eating that many calories. I had to keep supplementing with a lot of nuts and seeds and different things. In any event, I did have that support.

And whenever there would be a hotel, I liked to stay in a hotel because it gave me an opportunity to really relax. But it was just for, you know, for one night, I might get to the hotel at eight thirty or nine o'clock, sleep and get up at six and start again.

If there in many places, there were not hotels unless you had to go way off of your of the course. And I didn't want to do that. So we would just sleep in the RV many times.

Crossing Texas took about three months. And it was desert, and there were many places where we just camped alongside of the road in the desert, you know?

Wow. You're just walking through the dry desert. I just can't imagine. And all on your own. Yeah, and people say, didn't you have somebody to walk with you?

But a couple of places people would want to walk, like in Austin, I had a couple of people join in. Louisiana, a lovely woman decided to join me for a little while, but just like the day.

But I love that solitude. I really loved what it allowed my brain to do when I was just walking. It was almost hypnotic. Yeah, meditative, even. Yeah, so it was fine.

I mean, that worked out, I thought, really well. There were some days when the weather wasn't nice. Yeah, I bet. Yeah, yeah. How did you prepare physically, mentally, logistically for such an enormous undertaking to walk across the whole country?

I don't think you can train to walk across the country. A few weeks before I started, I thought, well, OK, I'm just going to see how far I can walk today.

And I got up real early on the weekend, walked, and I walked for hours and hours. And I wanted to see. I didn't know if I could do it. I didn't know if I could walk for eight hours.

Because I'd never walked for eight hours, right? So I just was walking. I was not running. And walking is a natural thing that we do. We can all do it unless you have some disability.

And I thought, well, that's fine. I walked and I showed that I could walk all day. And that was it. I said, I don't have time to train for this because I had to get my life in order in order to leave.

I didn't train for it at all, really, other than that. There was really nothing I could do to train for it. I will say, though, that I've been training for it since I started with Dr.

Bredesen because I became a very healthy 80-year-old. I have a sauna in my home. I took a sauna every morning for 30 minutes. I was used to the hot, the heat.

The desert didn't really bother me that much. My drivers were absolutely dying. They said, how can anybody live in this heat? I walked all day in this heat.

I've done the sauna, I do yoga every day, I meditate. I mean, I think I was preparing for this for a long time. there was one day we were actually meant to connect and you were almost run off the road by a driver.

Whereas, I mean, we haven't had a chance to talk about that since, you know, are you okay? Was that traumatic?

Obviously you survived to tell the tale, but were there kind of scary moments like that repeatedly along the way or did that one stand out?

So that was a terrible day. And I did have a few cases like that where that particular day, What happens is, you know, I was on two lane, two lane highways most of the time, because I've selected the smaller roads, and I would walk facing the traffic so I could see the oncoming traffic.

And people text, they get distracted, they have kids in the car, whatever. I've seen people actually see me and then like the car goes where their eyes go so they're coming toward me you know so i was like oh so i would just sort of jump off to the side but that particular time car was overtaking another car.

So I didn't see it. It was coming from behind me and the car was going really super fast. And it felt like it brushed my shoulder, but it actually, it must not have, yes, I would have been, but it actually, the force of it pushed me into the side of the road, into the weeds.

That was as strong, it might've been the wind or whatever it was, but I was, my heart was beating really fast. I was terrified. That was very scary. Literally, the force of it just knocked me off into the bushes.

I was very, very upset that day. But I think it was the getting hit by a car is probably the greatest danger that anyone faces when they try to do a long walk because it's just dangerous.

I mean, it is dangerous. That was really the only thing. I wasn't afraid of walking down lonely roads by myself. I never felt a sense that someone was going to harm me like a human being.

I had a lot of dogs chasing me and I had a couple of strategies to deal with the dogs, which included, I finally bought a supply of milk bones. So I had them in my pocket and I would sort of toss them out if the dogs started barking and chasing me.

And they would kind of look at me. bunny, and then eat the dog bones. And then I also had walking sticks, and I would clank them together. Once I was surrounded by about five dogs, and that was a little scary.

I'm not afraid of animals, so I think they knew that I was not really acting afraid, but I would bang the sticks together, and that would cause them to go home.

So those were the scary moments. What were the most exciting, enjoyable moments on your walk? There were so many enjoyable moments, so many times when I just felt thrilled at work, you know, just meeting people.

It was really the people that I met and listening to their stories, you know, talking to them and having them join me for little bits in real time. I think it's that.

I think the generosity of people, People would invite me to they said you can park your RV in my driveway. Some people invited me to come in and if I wanted to have a shower, which was very nice.

I remember once my friend Marilyn was driving with me and. was getting dark really quickly and I was sort of determined to make my mileage for that day and of course we're realizing we're out in this farmland area and there's nothing there was no place to stay and we were just probably figuring we were going to just park on the side of the road and this gentleman drove up in his pickup truck and he said are you ladies okay and we said yes we're fine we're just looking for a place to you know, parked for the night.

And he said, well, follow me down the road. I live just down the road and you're welcome to park in my driveway. So we looked at each other, we thought, well, is this guy gonna be an ax murderer or something?

But he seemed really nice and it turned out he was really nice. So we followed him down the road and he had a lovely home. He had, I don't know, kids and dogs and his parents were there and it was just really nice.

So they invited us to come and they fed us and they gave us a shower and it was nice. So it was those kinds of events that were always happening, you know, it was just really nice.

Yeah, the humanity, right? It's like people can be so different and on a different side of the political spectrum and live in a different part of the country.

And really like there's so much that unites us. There's so much that we have in common and the kindness, the kindness of strangers, it sounds like really stands out.

It really was. It made a big impression on me because I'm very optimistic. I'm very… I believe the best in people, and I think my attitude is optimistic, and I definitely saw that people are really very good, basically.

Judy, you radiate hope and optimism. How do you maintain that mindset? You've been through a lot. I mean, losing your mom to Alzheimer's, getting the diagnosis yourself.

Is there a trick to that, maintaining this mindset of hope and optimism? I think because my own story is so optimistic for me and I'm so grateful. I'm really grateful that I am where I am and that my brain works and my body works.

And I think that gratitude is just something I want to share with people. Send it out. Send the vibes out. Is there anything in particular you wish people understood about aging that is like a common misconception or things people get wrong?

I think people really obsess about numbers and ages, you know, like, oh, I've turned 75. Society is a little negative in this anyway, and they kind of tell us if you're over a certain age.

I really just tell them that it's a number. It's just a number. Don't be attached to that number as you have to act like a 75-year-old or a 70-year-old or an 80-year-old because as far as I'm concerned, this is what an 81-year-old looks like and acts like and can do.

So I try to impress it upon others that they can as well. Yeah, you're that model. For someone who's maybe been newly diagnosed, you know, someone in the shoes you were in at 66, 67 with cognitive impairment or even Alzheimer's itself, what would you hope that they know versus what you knew then?

There's so much that we know now that we did not know when I was diagnosed at age 67, and that it's not only Dr. Bredesen and you. I mean, so many other physicians and practitioners have discovered that you can reverse these symptoms if you do, if you take care of yourself in meaning sleep and low stress and good diet, tests for mold, tests for tick-borne illnesses, you know, all of these things all play a role in causing inflammation in the brain and causing it not to work properly.

So I think that it's just to give hope is to say that it's not a diagnosis of Alzheimer's now is not a death sentence. And there are things you can do, but you've got to really, if you're not able to read the books, get somebody to read them for you or listen to them.

I mean, I listened to Dr. Bredesen's latest book on audible, you know, as I was walking. I think I listened to it three times because I'd get interrupted, you know, by cars or different things.

But, you know, look around you and see and gravitate toward people who are positive and not let yourself be pulled down into total negativity.

Hope, Aging, and Caregiver Support

What about for caregivers? Is there anything, any message for them that you'd like to share? Well, I think caregivers are the unsung heroes in this whole story.

Couldn't agree more. Because they are work, it's 24-7 if you're really closely involved with your family member or

loved one. And it's like relentless, you know, and a lot of people economically can't afford to bring in help, enough help.

And, you know, we're just coming around to getting some social services and agencies that are providing some help, but it's not enough. It's never enough.

So I always, I talk to, I have actually some coaching clients who are caregivers and they're not getting coaching for themselves, but, I mean, directly, but how do I cope with this?

You know, how do I cope with this situation? And I always, I have, you know, I talk about like snacking, exercise snacks, exercise relaxation so that you take those smaller timeframes of 10 or 15 minutes where you can just relax, close your eyes, go outside for a walk and do some, make sure that you're doing exercise and as much as possible and also getting people to come in and give you a day off.

You know, you need that time just to go sit in a coffee shop or whatever. You know, you need that time. Yeah, make sure your own cup is full. Exactly.

On your own journey, what surprised you the most? Is there anything that was really unexpected as you've navigated this over the last 15 years? that what surprised me, I can't really think of anything that surprised me as far as following the protocol because it's been a journey, you know, it's not like a specific list of things, even though you can make a list of things to do, but I felt like it was more like peeling the onion, you know, you kind of try the basics and then you peel it, go a little deeper and you try something else and try something else.

And for me, That was the adventure part of it, that I could keep trying to try new things. And for example, you know, I got a V-Lite so that I could stimulate my brain more.

I got a walking treadmill under my desk so I could get exercise regularly. Just things like that that I've added to the program for myself. I'm always excited to read about new things.

What do you hope that your legacy is? What is the legacy you hope to leave? You know, you've had a very fulfilling career working in international development, and then now you're having this second career or maybe third career as a coach.

What do you hope people remember you as? I haven't thought a lot about my legacy because I'm not ready to exit right now, but I probably should think about it since we all are going to exit at some point.

But I think one thing I hope people will think about me and the work that I do and my message in that I'm always hopeful and I'm determined And some people have said unstoppable.

So I think if you can attach that description to yourself in terms of fighting memory loss as unstoppable, and you're really determined to keep going, if I could leave that with people, I think it would be a nice gift.

An incredible gift, a very generous gift. Judy, what brings you the most joy at this stage of life? I have to say I'm very oriented to my family. I love my family.

I'm so lucky. I have four wonderful grandchildren and a wonderful son and a wonderful daughter-in-law. And the joy right now is I've been gone for seven and a half months and I'm back home and we're really enjoying spending time together.

So I mean that, my family is important to me, my friends, but I think seeing people get better is such a joy to see that. And I do, I have had that opportunity over the several years that I've been working with people and coaching as a coach.

And that's what I want to continue doing as long as I can. Beautiful. Is there any secret you have to living a full life at every age, at any age that you want to pass on to our listeners?

To me, living a full life means taking the opportunities that come along and just going for it, you know, really putting your all into it, all your energy, and knowing that you can do more than you think you can do.

And you're smarter than you think you are, and your brain works better than you think it could if you give it a chance to. Before we wrap up, I want people to know how they can find out more about you, about your story, but also about access longevity.

So would you share with us where people can find you online? It's fine to use my email, Judy at AccessLongevity.com. I've also started a foundation called Alzheimer's Survivors Foundation, and that is very easy to get on, the Alzheimer'sFoundation.org.

that we would love to have people come in. And basically the reason for setting that up is to let more people know that there are survivors. The only one by far, there are many, many survivors and we're attracting more and more people to that every day.

So I would love to promote that and have people. Come and find out where we're really going to be a resource. We just want to be able to help people make decisions, refer them.

And we're not doing any medical treatment or anything like that, but just basically being a supportive source for resources. A community. Incredible. Judy, thank you for sharing your courage and your curiosity, your fierce commitment and determination to living fully at every age with sharp memory.

Your story is just really this reminder that a diagnosis is not your destiny, that with the right support, the right tools, the right mindset, it is totally possible to reclaim health and rewrite what aging looks like.

Your willingness to walk literally across the country at 80, 81 years old is just this powerful invitation for all of us to think bigger about what's possible as we age, as we move forward, even when the path gets hard, even when it's long or uncertain or there's a really scary diagnosis.

you are just showing the world what's possible, and especially when we refuse to give up on ourselves and on our brain health. So to everyone listening, Judy's Journey is a reminder that the hope is real, and it's not just hope, that there are real outcomes when we put the plan to work, that change is possible, that healing is possible, no matter where you're starting from.

And you deserve a future to live with clarity, connection, vitality, doing incredible, amazing things that people thought were impossible, just like Judy.

So Judy, we are cheering you on every step of the way of your lifelong adventure. And I'm so grateful to you for lighting the path for so many and for sharing your super inspiring story with us here today.

Thank you so much, Heather. Thank you for the work that you're doing. And it was really a pleasure to be here with you today. Thank you so much for listening to the Think Well, Age Well podcast.

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