

TONY GONZALES

Alzheimer's Association National Early-Stage Advisor



Tony Gonzales was diagnosed with mild cognitive impairment (MCI) in 2021 at age 47.

A life-long resident of California, Tony enjoyed a 25-year career in radio broadcasting, known to his listeners as “Chief.” He also had successful careers in real estate, banking and advertising. Most recently, he worked as a community development manager for the American Cancer Society.

Throughout his busy and diverse professional career, Tony prided himself on being a multitasker, whether broadcasting, speaking to audiences, conducting client meetings or overseeing budgets, Tony was always on the move and felt like he could do it all.

A few years ago, however, Tony noticed that juggling his various work responsibilities was becoming increasingly difficult. At the time, the family was preparing for his son’s wedding, so Tony attributed his forgetfulness to being stressed and tired.

Later that year, Tony got lost driving home from work. “I had driven this route a gazillion times,” Tony recalls. “But suddenly I had no idea where I was, where I had been or where I was going. I needed to call my wife for help.”

A few days later Tony was at home with his family when he saw an open package on the kitchen table addressed to him. He reached in and pulled out a pair of fun socks, which he excitedly showed to his family. His family looked at him with confusion – just five minutes before, he had done the same exact thing.

These events led Tony to share his concerns with his primary care physician. Tony’s doctor gave him a simple memory test, and when he failed, referred him to a neurologist. Following an eight-hour neuropsychological evaluation, MRI and lumbar puncture (which did not reveal biomarkers for Alzheimer’s), the doctors attributed Tony’s cognitive issues to sleep apnea.

At the time, Tony was severely overweight, prompting him to seek gastric bypass surgery to lose weight and address his sleep apnea. Tony lost 165 pounds and completely changed his diet and exercise regimen. Still, his cognition issues persisted.

“I had gone from being CEO of real estate companies to struggling to do first grade-level math,” Tony said. “I went from being a leader to needing someone to pick me up in the car. Something was definitely wrong.”

Following additional testing and evaluation, Tony was finally diagnosed with MCI. His diagnostic journey took two years. While Tony was “relieved that doctors were finally seeing what I was feeling,” the reality of his uncertain future hit Tony hard.

“I cried a lot initially,” Tony said. “I had witnessed dementia in some of my older family members and knew the difficult road that lay ahead. It was unfathomable that I would need to leave my job and that my life would be changing drastically.”

After a week of self-reflection, Tony decided he could shrink from his diagnosis no longer. He connected with the Alzheimer’s Association and joined an early-stage support group. He says the experience helped him realize that his diagnosis does not define him and that he still had much to offer. Since his diagnosis, Tony and his wife Kori have launched a video series, “*The Empty Nesters*,” documenting their life and adventures together. He also does an audio podcast “*Chief’s Country Classics*,” featuring music and stories from some of country music’s biggest stars.

“This disease picked on the wrong person,” Tony said. “After a moment of self-pity, I decided to fight back. Dementia is a horrible thing and I wish I didn’t have it, but it has provided an opportunity to use my voice to make a difference.”

As a member of the 2022-2023 National Early-Stage Advisory Group, Tony wants to educate others about the importance of early detection and diagnosis, especially those in the Hispanic community. He also wants to encourage those living with Alzheimer’s and dementia to embrace each day.

“I choose to look at the rainbows and not the storms,” Tony said. “Everyone focuses on the late stages of this disease, but you need to live each day to the fullest. My diagnosis has given me a new love for life and a chance to reevaluate what’s really important. I give more hugs now, say I love you to more people, and appreciate every moment of life as much as possible.”

Tony and his wife Kori live in Santa Maria, California. They have two adult children and one grandchild.