Most Sundays I pack up my three children (JD, 10; Jake, 6; Maddie, 5) to make the 20-minute drive from Norton, Mass., to Rhode Island to spend a little time with my mother. Each visit is inevitably the same. First we begin with my children fighting in the parking lot over who gets to push the buzzer to request entrance into my mom’s facility. The next half hour is the four of us sitting with my mom, holding her hand, giving her hugs, and trying to get her to speak.

The only word she now says is “no.” To keep our sanity, we all have a little fun with the questions we ask her. JD asks, “Is Jake your favorite grandson?” I ask if she is a Democrat. And we all giggle with delight when she responds with a resounding “No!” As a caregiver you must find some humor in order to not lose your mind.

My mom, Susan Scott, a 1965 graduate of CUA, has been living for the past 10 years, since the age of about 60, with semantic dementia — a progressive neurodegenerative disorder. The disease is characterized by loss of memory in the verbal and nonverbal domains. There is no current treatment for this disease and while she is physically healthy she has neither recognition nor any awareness of people and things.

I consider my mother a pioneer. At CUA, she majored in mathematics and there she met and married my father, Bob Gillispie. Immediately following college she worked for the CIA and then stayed home for five years to raise me and my brother, Rob. In the early 1970s she attended Rutgers Law School and was one of two women to graduate with her class. She went on to practice environmental litigation until she was appointed a justice to the Superior Court in New Jersey.

I always looked up to her. Even in the midst of building her professional career she made time for me. She never missed one of my lacrosse games or volleyball matches in high school and still managed to become one of the first women partners at her law firm. Throughout her life she loved to walk the beaches in New Jersey and Cape Cod, where she also loved to sail. She enjoyed reading mysteries and spending time with friends and family. Fiercely competitive, she played tennis in college and continued to play throughout her life. She had a wonderful sense of humor and loved to laugh along with others.

My mom and I were a unique pair. We did not have the typical teenage “mother/daughter” relationship. No screaming matches on what clothes I would wear or who I should hang out with. We discussed current events and politics, played tennis, and during my senior year in high school, together we cared for my mom’s father, Bailey, who lived with us as he fought and ultimately lost his battle with cancer. Therefore, it was no surprise when I decided to attend Catholic University just like my mother had 27 years earlier.

After I graduated in 1992, my mom and I took a road trip to Kiawah Island, S.C., and played golf, read books on the beach, and shopped the markets in Charleston. She gave me career advice and encouraged me to get my master’s degree. My mom and I were great friends and her inspiration lives on even amidst the sadness of her debilitating disease. She is still a driving force in how I live my life today.

A nurse once told me that caring for someone with dementia is like the longest funeral you will ever attend. This couldn’t be more accurate. If it weren’t for my husband and children and incredible friends my mom and I developed at Catholic University, I wouldn’t have survived this chapter. I don’t know what the next chapter will bring, but I know that with my family and the amazing CUA community members to provide support, I will make it through.

Throughout my life, my mom taught me lessons that I would like to pass on — “Hug your kids, cherish your spouse, thank God every day, help others, and leave a lasting impression.”

Megan Artz received her B.A. in politics from CUA in 1992 and her M.A. in government from Johns Hopkins University in 1996. In 1998 she took a development position at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government. She has been in higher education development ever since, and is currently employed at Boston College Law School.

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Megan Artz at her 2001 wedding with her mother, Susan.