

Thoughts on Caregiving from a Granddaughter's Perspective

Kendra S. Schumaker, LMSW, Executive Director
SarahCare Adult Day Center

My grandmother went into a nursing home at the age of eighty-one. She had been experiencing physical and cognitive decline for several years prior to going into the nursing home. She would become confused, thinking that the neighbors were fighting, or having parties in her yard (all untrue). She believed that an unknown woman gave birth to a baby in a car outside her home, and eventually became fearful that people would break into her home to harm her. Our family postponed the need for nursing home placement by having a family member move into her home, which seemed to solve our concerns for about a year and a half. Eventually, she believed that my cousin (her caregiver) was not coming home at night, and she began to believe that similar acts of wild parties, loud music, etc. were part of her daily experience even though family stopped by on a regular basis to make sure all her needs were met.

As a family we were concerned about her safety when she would forget to turn the burner off her gas stove, or leave the water running for hours on end. One February morning, she fell and fractured her wrist and elbow while walking on the sidewalk outside her home. Luckily, she lay out on the sidewalk for only a short period of time before being found by a neighbor. It was at that time that we realized it could have been much worse. We knew that for her own safety she could not stay home alone, even if it was only for a few hours during the day. With much of her family living out of town, nursing home placement became inevitable. Within two weeks, she was admitted to the local medical care facility for long-term care.

We would often bring my grandmother home for visits on the weekends. We tried to assist her with personal care, just as we did when she was home. Washing my grandmother's hair was a way that we could connect and enjoy each other's company without using words. The gentle act of shampooing her hair, watching her smile, hearing her hum along to music (that may or may not be playing), rinsing her hair in water that was just the right temperature, and finally rolling it in soft rollers was as enjoyable for her as it was for me. It was during that time that she would smile, look at me lovingly, and was not agitated as she was much of the rest of the day. The act of bathing someone can be one of the most intimate and rewarding experiences life can bring, if it is done in the right physical and emotional environment.

Caregiving is often a very powerful, spiritual, and empowering experience for the caregiver, the family, and the person being cared for. At times family members may disagree on what is best for their loved one, even if they agree that what they have been doing is not working. Caregiving for a person with dementia, or cognitive related issues, can be more challenging because of the repetitive nature of interactions with that person. It may be frustrating at times, and caregivers often report feeling a sense of helplessness and anxiety about the future when they think about how difficult care may become. Simple interactions can be frustrating for caregivers, especially when they compare the interactions they have had with their loved one at the present time to what the interactions have been in the past. At some level, the basic human experience becomes heightened, especially, when you connect with someone at a level that supersedes language. Being a caregiver offers a range of emotions. It can be physically demanding, exhausting, and greatly rewarding all at the same time. It is when you connect purely on an

emotional level that you realize there is truly something that makes us all uniquely human as our body and mind ages, changes, and becomes something different than it was before.

Caregiver's Corner is provided as a public service of the **Caregiver Resource Network**. The Caregiver Resource Network is a collaboration of West Michigan organizations dedicated to providing for the needs and welfare of family and professional caregivers within the community. Funded by the Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan with Older American's Act Title III-E, Family Caregiver Support funds. For more information consult our website at www.caregiverresource.net or call toll free at 1-888-456-5664.