

# Caregiver's Corner Column (June 2014)

## **Aging with Dignity: Starring my Mother & Me**

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“Life for me is like a play in which I was made to put on the wrinkles and confinements of old age and pushed out onto the stage; but I knew it was still ME inside!” (Author unknown)

### ACT I. AGING

Having worked in healthcare for many years, I was aware of the needs and losses of the elderly. I understood that the aging process included physical, social, and emotional changes. Usually when we are young, we look forward to our aging and our birthdays. Later on however, we begin to try to be younger than we are. I finally got to the time when I considered it a compliment to hear someone say, “You don’t look your age!” I was active and involved in my life and hardly realized that the aging process was happening to me.

My mom’s name was Pat and I was the oldest of her five children. Imagine the shock of learning that my mother had dementia and I would be a co-guardian. Imagine the shock when our roles were reversed in the play of life without any warning. Although I was a dementia consultant, educator and speaker; this was not the play I thought I was in.

When the time came for the role reversal, I became the MOM and she became the CHILD. I was used to her being the mom and me being the child.

### ACT II. DIGNITY

Being a member of the Baby Boomer Generation, I mainly thought about ME and was busy with my life. Now this play began to change. My mother needed me to play a different role than I had ever played before and although I had practiced with other people’s parents in my career; this was an entirely different play now.

I have heard it said, “Dignity is when you know someone’s song and sing it to them when they forget.” Watching my mother age and lose everything she had worked so hard to get was very difficult. When we moved her into the assisted living where I was the dementia care trainer; I was face to face with something I never experienced. I could teach others, but to walk the same path as our families and residents, that was different. It was a hard lesson, but I learned to honor my own mother and to give her some of the best years of her life before she passed away.

To be honest with you, I still didn’t realize that I had grown old. I didn’t realize it until the day when I passed a mirror and saw the reflection of my grandmother! When did I put on that older face? And how was I going to maintain my dignity and purpose now that the play of aging was starring ME?

I have come to accept as best that I can, my role of aging with dignity. I work in a wonderful assisted living home and this is what I hear now, “Isn’t it fun for us two old ladies to sit together and laugh?”

The play goes on into a new scene. My new role is to teach and mentor the next generation about aging with dignity, and with practice I am really enjoying my part! Now, here is my question for

you, in whatever role you play, “What will YOU do to help others and yourself to “Age with Dignity?”

And Jan is aging happily ever after! (I miss my Mom!)

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