

Caregiver's Corner Column (October 2015)

Life as a Long Distance Pre-Caregiver

By Dusty Scheuerman

Elder's Helpers

I grew up in a tiny town outside of Cleveland named Newbury (Google it; it really is tiny!). Luckily, after High School, I made it out and made my way to beautiful West Michigan. As with many other transplants, I have been stuck here ever since, in a good way though.

Over the years a lot has changed in this beautiful city, and in my life. I got married (only twice) and now have 4 wonderfully great... cats. You thought I was going to say kids, didn't you? I have grown older, as we all have, including my parents, who still live in that tiny little town in Ohio. They live on a horse farm with no hired help and really couldn't be happier. Mom is done raising us roustabouts and dad retired several years ago. So as the saying goes, "Life is Good"... right?

Here's the problem: my older brother lives in Texas, I live here in Michigan, and all of my other relatives live in Georgia. This means that mom and dad are completely on their own for most of the time, except when I feel like driving 6 hours one-way to see them on a weekend. With work and basically trying to have a life here in Grand Rapids, it's hard to get down there to see my folks as much as I would like to. It's even harder for my brother in Texas because of the obvious distance, but also because he is married with two kids, which finally quenched my parents' thirst for grandchildren, thank God!

So how am I supposed to take care of the ones who took care of me for all those years when I am so far away? Granted there are telephone calls and emails, and the occasional Skype or FaceTime (when they can figure out the technology), but those are no substitute for actually being there to see how they are doing on a day-to-day basis.

Luckily, my parents are very active in their church, and have a wonderful group of close friends young and old that are willing to check in on them from time to time. They have also been very fortunate in their health. Other than dad's quadruple bypass several years ago, they really haven't had any medical issues (knock on a whole forest of wood!).

Also, they travel extensively, which worries me even more because they drive everywhere, sometimes even all the way to Texas! My dad is only 72 and my mom is still claiming to be 39, which is weird seeing as I am in my 40's? But as I have learned in my short time in the home health care field, anything could happen.

The good news is that just about anywhere you travel in the country, there is an Area Agency on Aging or a Department on Aging, or at least a Senior Center. Even in that tiny town, they have several resources that my parents were completely oblivious to!

I have also started paying more attention to their day-to-day health and activities and have started to actively talk to them about things like possible household hazards (such as loose rugs, poor lighting, clutter, etc.) and safety concerns like grab bars in the bathroom.

Another not so fun conversation I need to have with them is about those 2 dirty words... ADVANCE DIRECTIVE. Not really looking forward to this, but I have been easing them into the conversation slowly by asking them about their experiences with their parents during the last years of their lives.

So far, all is well, (THANK GOD!) but it is nice to know that there are so many programs and resources out there for me, and for my folks, even in that tiny little town.

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.