

Caregiver's Corner Column (March 2014)

Peace of Mind: One Gift at a Time

By Joanne Feutz, OTR, CAPS

Disability Advocates of Kent County

“Hello, this is your Dad’s neighbor. Just thought you would like to know that he’s on his ladder climbing to the roof again. Don’t know what he is up to, but we’ll talk him down till you can get here.”

If you are a caregiver for a parent who lives alone, this is one of those phone calls you dread but can get all too frequently. With a widowed parent in his late 80’s, I provided intermittent care 2-3 times a week, traveling 15 miles across town. Neighbors kept an eye out for these kinds of safety risks and called when needed. As his caregiver and daughter, I supported his decision to be independent and active, but there is a fine line between safe activity and increased risks for falls and injury.

Chronic conditions such as arthritis, macular degeneration, and heart disease can decrease strength, coordination, balance and vision. Climbing ladders, stepping over clutter in the home, or yard maintenance involving motorized tools can pose a risk like never before. As a caregiver, the stress of worrying and reacting every time there is an accident or dangerous situation can take its toll on top of the normal caregiving time and tasks. Many of these activities and objects or “tools” have been part of a daily routine for years and define a life history, past abilities and purpose. How do we as caregivers promote a sense of being useful while increasing “peace of mind” safety at the same time?

As a retired builder, my Dad’s ladder had been an important tool and “partner” and had lots of memories associated with it. What if the ladder continued to be a part of his life in another way? Gifting our prized possessions to a family member who will use it and treasure it may be an option. Keeping it in the family may ease some of those nostalgic memories and sentimental feelings of parting. A caregiver or family member can begin the discussion of passing on things while the gifter can still enjoy the family member’s joy and use in the gift and as a means of providing for his family’s future.

A ladder is a perfect wedding gift to a grandson buying his first house. Electric hedge trimmers and a wheelbarrow can find a home with a granddaughter starting her own gardening company. The sleds in the garage that clutter a safe walkaway to the trash can become Christmas gifts to grandchildren who are now having their own children and who will have fun with them just as they did as children sledding down Grandpa’s hill. A snow blower might become a welcome home gift to a son moving back to a Michigan winter. Other items may pose no threat in and of themselves, but gifting them reduces clutter and tripping hazards.

The significance of such gifts from a parent or grandparent would be treasured, especially with an accompanied story or note about its memories. As these possessions create new memories, family traditions go on and the gifter can still be a part of them. Gifting possessions can bring new purpose to life and stories to share with others.

Gifting possessions to family members and seeing their surprise and sincere gratitude can be rewarding especially when thank-you notes, photos, and stories about how they are newly being used are received in return. It can also engage family members in acts of caregiving and phone

calls to the gifter. And as a caregiver, creating a safe home for a parent can bring relief and peace of mind, one gift at a time.

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 IIIIE, Family Caregiver Support funds. For more information consult our website at www.CaregiverResource.net or call toll free at 1-888-456-5664.