

## **"THIS IS ME" ...**

By Lisa Przybysz

As a society, are we remiss in focusing on our elderly loved ones as simply a parent, grandparent, great grandparent, client, or patient? Are we missing out on learning the particularly wonderful things that each elderly "person" in our lives has to share with us about themselves; special memories from their lives, stories and traditions that we can enjoy learning and sharing with them before and after they leave us?

These were the questions and wonderings circling my mind as I was preparing a presentation for a unique, lively, and fun set of individuals who happen to live at an Independent Living facility. I had shared presentations with them before and was somewhat familiar with who would be attending this upcoming presentation. Deep in thought, I began thinking less about a presentation as a whole and more about each individual as their own, special person. I wanted to know more. More importantly, I believed strongly each person would be excited to share the beautiful, colorful things that make them who they have become! I wanted them to begin tapping into who they are by revisiting their happy, carefree childhood memories.

In preparation, I found large, vibrant, colorful cut-out 3-D photographs of a variety of garden flowers for each person where they would write their treasured memory on the back to present and share with the group. Additionally, I made a decorative, matted background suitable for framing entitled, "My Favorite Things," where they would add their "favorites" such as perfume, music, book, a family gathering, and more that they treasure above all others. The vibrant, colorful flowers would bloom a garden of cherished memories they hold dear from their lives, especially their childhoods, which they would share while hanging in their Activity Room. The decorative, matted photo background could be framed and hung in their homes or given as gifts to loved ones.

Finally, presentation day arrives! The ladies are ready and may be thinking that this session would be like the many others they have had before.

As I excitedly unveil my gift to them, their faces change from normal listening, to quizzical, to deep thought and wonder, and finally sparkling eyes and smiles from ear to ear! They had been thought of as mom, grandma, and great grandma for so long, they were astounded to believe I was asking them to tap into, share, and celebrate who they each are as a person from childhood to the present! To say they were enthusiastic to get started could be compared to children ready to open birthday or Christmas gifts!

They immediately chose their favorite vibrant cut-out flowers whether it was tulips, roses, daisies, sunflowers, orchids, peonies, violets, or marigolds. They were already starting to tell childhood tales and reliving those beloved memories. As I looked across the room at each face reliving the childhood memories they hold most dear, I saw pure joy! They each shared of special heartfelt days playing hopscotch with friends, fishing with their dads on endless sunny summer days, sewing and knitting with their mothers, Double Dutch jump rope, splashing and swimming at the lake as kids, and telling tales of

their first kiss! This led to first boyfriends and high school dances and memorable classroom teachers! No doubt about it...their garden was blooming!

The photos of "favorites" brought more delightful discussion of Faberge perfume (which instantly brought my grandmother's floral scent to life), Thanksgiving Dinner a favorite family holiday, and changes in music from Count Basie, to Moon River, to Elvis. Favorite book discussions went from schoolbooks they read to lifetime reading of classics such as Gone With the Wind, War and Peace, and The Bible. The best part of the frame worthy photo of "favorites" was where they signed their name at the bottom, and it stated, "This is Me..."

Each person stood up, faster than I'd ever seen them, and proudly presented each of their treasured memories and favorites, as I watched the years melt away from their faces and bodies and ended with glee stating, "This is Me!"

That day I learned so many incredible things from them! I could have done a topical informative presentation that day. And, it would have been a good learning opportunity. However, what happened that day was a once in a lifetime opportunity filled with blessings and joy which humbled and honored me to witness. Most importantly, this was their day, an opportunity for each person's garden to bloom and to celebrate, "This is Me!"

This article 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](http://www.CaregiverResource.net) or call toll free at 1-888-456-5664.