

Educating Seniors: Bring Your Health... Home

A Monthly Column by Kimberly Harmon RN, BSN

The Art of Home Health Care: The View from the Ground Level

Walking out of Shaw's the other day, I saw a departing customer toss some spare change into one of those ubiquitous Salvation Army bell donation pots. His generosity inspired me, so I also tossed in some spare change. The experience made me think about how people give during the season of giving: Most of us give *stuff*, and some of us give care. It's to the caregivers that I devote this column.

When it comes to caring for those who have cared for us, Americans in this millennium confront a unique challenge: handling the cost, planning, and management of caring for our elders. A handful of people choose to be caregivers, and they deserve to be recognized.

Most of us know the numbers—the U.S. senior population is estimated to grow to 77 million people by the end of this decade—but to quote a famous man (Aaron Levenstein) about numbers, “Statistics are like bikinis. What they reveal is suggestive, but what they conceal is vital.”

In this case, these numbers conceal the people and personalities of those who provide care to our loved ones. In this column, loyal readers, I share with you two caregivers who truly “get it.”

I've worked with a lot of caregivers; Patti Furmanick and Lydia Oquendo are two of the best. But instead of my telling you why I believe Patti and Lydia “get it,” when you've finished this column you'll understand why they say “we take this work personally because we have to.”

First, here are a few details about Patti and Lydia.

With more than a decade of caring, Patti is a Companion/Caregiver who simply says of her career choice, “I want to help everybody.” She's certainly qualified, having stayed at home with her two kids for eight years, and caring for her brother for three years and her mother-in-law for one year. Prior to joining the agency, Patti delivered meals on wheels in Auburn.

For her efforts, Lydia, a Certified Home Health Aide, recently received a “Health Care Hero” award from the *Worcester Business Journal*. For Lydia, it's personal. Her grandmother had dementia before the health community knew how to treat the debilitating affliction. Lydia's “always wanted to help people in need.”

Of their profession, both Patti and Lydia say it's not an easy day. “Our clients aren't always receptive to what we're trying to do with them.” According to Patti, “I can tell what kind of day I'm going to have just by looking into my clients' eyes. The role of a companion/caregiver is more than providing just healthcare; we help people live day to day. It's not the type of job you leave at the job. We do this because we care about people. We want them to have a good life.”

Here's how Patti helps one of her clients, Mrs. B. of Auburn. "She was my first client and she has dementia. I work with her four days a week; she has good days and bad days. The other day we sang Christmas carols and danced in the kitchen, so it was a good day. Every day we have a little schedule: Some days it's just normal household chores; some days we go shopping. I try to keep her as involved and as independent as possible."

Says Lydia: "Nothing prepares me to come in the door in the morning and my client doesn't remember her name. All the training I had only prepared me for the medical and physical stuff I have to deal with. My training didn't prepare me for the mental and psychological demands of working with a client, of helping them to maintain their dignity while still living safely and securely."

"I've cared for Mr. M. in Auburn for over a year—he's not our typical client. He's very socially isolated so we've become his social lifeline. When we started he was very depressed and withdrawn; I went in and really took charge: I tried to motivate him with a straightforward approach."

"The results have been tremendous. We got Mr. M. into a day program two days a week to increase his socialization, he's lost weight; he's far more adept socially. Now we're working on getting him his own bus pass so he can go out on his own. He's much happier."

Patti tells a similar story. "I was working with Ms. V. and visited her for the first time in a nursing home. She totally didn't want me there, so I tried to establish a relationship using humor. That didn't work; she only got angrier. So I just sat next to her and kept her company. After a while she got used to me being there; at one point she took my hand and said she wished she could go home with me. She just wanted the comfort of knowing someone was there with her."

To me, the main challenge about being a caregiver in the community is that every situation is different. Patti and Lydia are great because they're able to adapt to any situation. Most importantly, they engender trust among those for whom they provide care. After all, as Lydia says, "if you don't trust me, how are you going to let me take care of you?"

Lydia and Patti have a few mantras that guide their daily work: "We don't do things *for* our clients; we do things *with* our clients. We simply treat others as we'd want our families to be treated." And every once in a while, they say, a client will thank them and that's the most rewarding aspect of their job.

Remember, the essence of home health care is to provide individuals, families and loved ones with services that promote maximum comfort and independence in the home.

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