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HEALTH CARE STAFF: Care with a passion to save the world

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Written by Christina Oneill
Monday, 28 May 2007



Lydia Oquendo (center) with home health clients George and Tefta Pojani of Worcester.

Lydia Oquendo cultivates her patients like flowers. And they bloom under her care.

"My brother calls me 'Red Cross,' because I want to save the world," she said. Born in New York and raised in Connecticut, Oquendo - a home health aide with Harmon Home Health - was introduced to care giving at age 9, when her grandmother joined her family's household.

A typical home visit can find her administering a shower, giving a manicure and playing cards (with a good-humored running commentary) - all to make a person feel better. She's the one who, on a good day, coaxes elders out of their homes to take them on short walks in the sunshine, and she's also someone who, on a cold December day that's not a regular work day, may bring fresh muffins to a house-bound nonagenarian.

"They say it only takes one person to make a difference," she said, to let elderly clients know that there's at least one person in the world that appreciates what the elders did to nurture the younger generation.

Kimberly Harmon, CEO of Harmon Home Health, noted Oquendo's willingness to take on extra assignments, especially the most difficult ones. She also commended Oquendo's communication skills and her drive to meet the needs of both patients and families.

"Lydia takes the time to understand," she said. "She listens, and by doing so, she recognizes [clients'] strengths and weaknesses. She is never hesitant to call the office with changes or recommendations."

Caring and learning

Oquendo also emphasizes the need for caregivers to learn compassion, loyalty and love for themselves. She likens a caregiver to a tree, with roots, trunk and branches. "If you are not strong enough, the branches will die."

To talk with Oquendo is to see her innate desire to find out more about how people tick. "You learn a lot from them," she said of her clients. "It makes me appreciate the

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things we have [today]." But a more compelling dynamic, she said, is a tendency among frail elders to cycle back to youth or infancy.

It takes work, and art, to gently bring them safely back into a world in which they can remain in their own homes. On some early morning visits, for example, "It's like having a 4-year-old who doesn't want to eat breakfast," she said. "How can the mind do that to a body? That's what really intrigues me. One day they're OK, the next morning, [not]. Sometimes, they just need a little conversation."

Oquendo is taking writing improvement courses at Quinsigamond Community College to improve her written communication skills. But her innate communication skills are readily apparent. The Health Care Heroes award, she said, should go not just to her, but to all the unsung home health aides who make life better, day by day, for their charges.

Her brother got it right, she does want to save the world.

- Christina P. O'Neill

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