

A loving approach to dementia care

BY JULIANA URRICO
Guest Columnist

Four years ago, my paternal grandfather was diagnosed with vascular dementia.

Like most people, I was not prepared for my own dementia journey from a loving granddaughter to caregiver, and finally, to a stranger in the latter stages. I experienced the progression of the disease as analogous to a house full of lights, each of which go out one by one. Each time a light turns off, a part of grandpa shut down and was lost. Our family was heartbroken, hopeless and helpless.

Although there were challenges, finding the ability to live in the moment can be beautiful. It brings me joy to know that I was still able to enjoy my time spent with him and to listen, be present and laugh. He still loved dancing and singing, but most of all he never forgot how much he loved baseball. I want people to know that individuals with dementia can still lead meaningful lives and inspire others. It is the family that needs to find connection with the person transforming before them.

Being his caregiver required more than simply assisting with the Activities of Daily Living (ADLs), such as eating, bathing and mobility. Consistent positive messaging that includes active listening and speaking kindly helps to maintain dignity and preserve quality of life. Being his caregiver taught me more than I ever thought possible. It taught me to appreciate the small moments, and not to take anything for granted. As I accepted the fact that there is no cure, I remained committed to finding ways to bring him comfort and maintain his dignity. I earned a Master of Arts degree at Sacred Heart University, specializing in Clinical Mental Health Counseling. Because of my grandfather, I decided to intern at The Greens at Greenwich Assisted Living Community – a community that specializes



Intern Juliana Urrico with a resident of The Greens at Greenwich
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in dementia care. Regardless of where a resident is in their progression of the disease, The Greens at Greenwich incorporates the therapeutic use of creative arts to improve quality of life and tailors to individual preferences based on their functioning level. They believe the use of creative arts engages the resident in ways that bring joy and connection.

I am responsible for developing and conducting specialized programs in the arts. This affords me the opportunity to build meaningful connections with each resident and provide care that goes beyond physical needs. The programs are a stimulating tool which allows me to tend to the resident's emotional needs and make a tangible difference. As a Clinical Mental Health Counselor, I now have tools to work with people like my grandfather.

People with dementia experience changes in how they understand the world around them. By entering their reality, this offers a sense of security as empathy is established and trust is built. It is important to understand that the resident's perception is their truth. The stigmatizing view that individuals are no longer themselves without their memory erodes our ability to communicate and treat dementia. Although dementia results in the decline and ultimate loss of cognitive functioning, the essence of the person remains. Let us enjoy the privilege of knowing who they once were and appreciate who they are in each moment.

For more information, visit thegreensatgreenwich.com or call 203-486-8642.