

Caregiving Is Not for Sissies!

Anyone who has been a caregiver knows how true this is. Traditionally, family caregivers have been primarily women; however, research suggests that the number of male caregivers may be increasing and will continue to do so due to a variety of social demographic factors.

This is certainly true for families utilizing Adult Life Programs' services. I see more and more men serving as the primary caregiver in their families. Following are two stories of male caregivers: one a husband caring for his wife and the other the story of two sons caring for their mother.

I had the privilege of spending some time with these men. They are all very different but had some noticeable similarities: a deep and strong love for their family member even in the face of adversity and an ability to laugh at things they had no control over.

Adult Life Programs salutes caregivers! Hip. Hip. Hooray!



Wayne and Bruce on their mother's front porch.

Hazel H. is a strong, independent woman. She had to raise 7 children by herself, working in hosiery, furniture and being a waitress. Her sons, Bruce and Wayne, admit they don't know how she did it. She didn't even drive until she was 40 years old! She walked to work and if she thought there would be bad weather, she would pack two lunches so she would be able to stay and work.

Then, in 2003, Hazel had a stroke. By all accounts, she recovered from it well but began to become forgetful. Her children became concerned about her but they had different ideas of what to do. Some of the children thought their mom needed to move to a facility. Wayne and Bruce disagreed.

So instead of a facility, Hazel moved in with Bruce but they kept her house. Hazel did not really like this arrangement. She felt like she was intruding when she lived with Bruce. She didn't have her porch or her bed. One day, Hazel asked her daughter to take her by her house so she could pick something up. Hazel entered the house and the next thing she knew, her unsuspecting daughter was locked out! Hazel pleaded, "As long as I can still get to my porch and sit there, please let me stay at home." Wayne agreed to honor his mother's wishes as long as he knew he could keep her safe. Triumphant, Hazel moved back into her home where she still lives.

Wayne did not know how challenging it would become to keep his mother safe. Hazel's memory deteriorated, she began to wander, forgot to eat and now cannot do the simplest task without assistance. She currently requires 24 hour a day care.

Wayne spends the night with her while Bruce works nights. Bruce took a pay cut to work nights so the two of them could keep their mom at home. Wayne leaves to go to work and Bruce arrives in the morning to get his mom up and ready to attend Adult Life Programs. He is there when the ALP bus arrives to pick her up. Bruce has become popular with other participants and staff at ALP because, every morning, he boards the bus to greet everyone.

Bruce is there when Hazel returns on the bus in the afternoon and then Wayne shows up and takes over for the evening. And it all starts over again. The weekends are more difficult because Adult Life Programs is closed. Both men admit that they have no personal life of their own, but they don't say this with any resentment. They want to do this.

It is pretty obvious without them saying so, but neither of them could work if they did not have Adult Life Programs. Besides assisting them, they see the benefits for their mom. It keeps her stimulated. She used to read the newspaper everyday from cover to cover and she was religious about watching the news but as she deteriorated, she quit doing all those things she used to be interested in. Adult Life Programs keeps her stimulated. She is more restful at the end of the day after attending. And they can tell she loves living in her own home. Some of her routines have not changed in years. Every morning, she makes her bed and every evening she closes the drapes and turns off the lights (even if Wayne is still using it!)

It's difficult being a caregiver but Bruce says, "Mom still laughs, still smiles, still has peace and joy." And thanks to her loving sons and Adult Life Programs' services, Hazel still sleeps in her own bed at night and sits on her front porch looking very content.



Jimmy and Ethel share a moment at Lenoir ALP

They don't exactly say it was love at first sight but it is obvious watching them laugh and tease that they were interested in one another early on in their meeting and still very much enjoy one another's company. Jimmy and Ethel Johnson make a striking couple who are both quick with a laugh. They were married in 1986.

Good times were interrupted when Ethel had a stroke in 1999. The news was dismal. The doctors predicted that Ethel would live her remaining days in a nursing home in a vegetative state. Ethel had different plans. She recovered enough to be able to be discharged from the nursing home and return home with significant needs, including full time use of a wheelchair. This recovery was a blessing; however, Jimmy was working full time at the telephone company. He had to be at work at 8:00 a.m. He hired help to come to their home and care for Ethel, but often the help showed up late or cancelled. He frequently had to leave work early to get home to relieve the help.

Jimmy admits he read in the paper one day about Adult Life Programs and thought, "I need to check into that place," but as is so often the case with busy caregivers, he never got around to it. Finally, when his help was no longer available, he checked out Adult Life Programs. He laughs, "I could have worked a whole lot better all those years, if I would have had Adult Life Programs in my life earlier." Jimmy says that Adult Life Programs is so easy. The program has provided him with opportunities to do things he never would have been able to do without it. And, he says, "It's good for Ethel. She has gotten better since she has been here."

In fact, soon after she started attending, Ethel stopped needing to use the wheelchair: quite an achievement for a woman who was supposed to be unresponsive. Ethel is far from unresponsive. She has a big laugh and a wonderful sense of humor. She still has difficulty getting around, but her husband says that even if Ethel is not getting up and dancing, she is still listening, interacting with others and having conversations. It is good for her mind. "At home," he says, "She doesn't get that kind of stimulation all the time."

The Center Director laughs at this and proceeds to tell a story about Ethel. Earlier this week, someone brought in a karaoke machine and began playing music. Ethel got up, walked across the room and declared, "I like that song." She proceeded to dance along and when the music stopped said, "Well, that wasn't long enough," and sat down. It appears that Ethel is getting more than mental stimulation at Adult Life Programs!

Jimmy retired last year. Ethel still comes to Adult Life Programs because he can't leave her at home alone and he needs some time for himself. If she got it in her mind she was going to cook, she would and might forget to turn off the stove. Jimmy would be too worried to leave her alone and she has such difficulty getting around that if he had to run errands, he would have to leave her in the car. Jimmy laughs at this idea. He's left her in the car before and she got mad. The always feisty Ethel soon had the police in the parking lot checking on her. But that's another story. . .

Jimmy wants to tell me more about Adult Life Programs, "The staff members here are so genuinely concerned. It gives me peace of mind. When I walk out the door, I don't have to worry. I know someone is taking care of her: **more** than one person is taking care of her." He admits to liking the place himself. "The staff makes me feel like **I'm** special. If they treat me so well, I know they are treating Ethel well."