

Memory Makers: Making memories for two

BY MELISSA WELCH
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When one considers vulnerable populations in the U.S., impoverished children, individuals facing homelessness, orphans, and other populations come to mind. One population that is often overlooked: People with dementia and their caregivers.

Imagine for a moment that you and your spouse have been involved in your church for a long time. You have developed connections and friendships to most of the individuals there. Then one day, your spouse begins exhibiting signs of dementia. As time goes on, he or she begins to not only have problems with their memory, but also begins to say socially inappropriate things. Neuropsychological testing and imaging confirm your worst fears. Your spouse is diagnosed with dementia.

Sunday after Sunday, the church that you used to love going to seems a little less "warm." You drop Sunday school from your weekly activities after your spouse makes a rude comment in response to one of the discussion questions. You know that people are aware of your spouse's dementia because you have been open about it. Yet, you notice people avoiding conversations with both of you. When they do talk to you, their discomfort only magnifies yours. You are surrounded by a group of people and yet you have never felt so alone. Eventually, getting

your spouse to church becomes quite burdensome, so you stop going altogether.

Social isolation is just one of the many burdens caregivers face. Caregivers of all age groups report poorer physical and emotional health than their counterparts (Gallup-Healthways, 2011). Caregiver stress has been linked to financial strain, self-neglect, decreased sleep and unhealthy eating. Even more importantly, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that caregivers can have "increased risk of early death."

Caregivers and those who are facing dementia need opportunities to engage, to bond with each other, to be accepted, to laugh and to decompress. They are grieving so many losses. Caregivers need opportunities where they can make "memories for two." They know that in time, the person they love will continue to lose function and their ability to communicate.

Memory Cafes were first started in Europe. In 1997, Dr. Bere Miesen introduced the idea of memory cafes to reduce stigma for those who have dementia and their loved ones. Memory cafes have been recognized for reducing social isolation and providing brain stimulation. Dementia is never mentioned during the café, as our focus is making memories and not on the disease itself. These gatherings are growing in popularity across the

United States. North Carolina now hosts about 20, several of which are in the Triad region.

Novant Health opened its first memory café, "Memory Makers," on Aug. 7, 2019, through funding by the Novant Health Forsyth Medical Center Foundation. This February will be our third Memory Makers event. Our cafes are held at Mount Carmel United Methodist Church in Winston-Salem from noon to 2 p.m.

Now, people who are in similar situations as the above scenario have a place to go and in the words of one of our participants, "It's a place where we can just 'be'."

Our last "Memory Makers" event was so special. We had a "Memory Tree Farm" theme. A professional photographer was hired to capture the moment for those who participated. Ornaments were made collaboratively by participants to represent their lives. Some of the ornaments were given to us so that we could represent their lives year after year on our Christmas tree at the clinic. Others went home with participants to serve as a visual reminder of the "making memories" with their loved one.

Memory Makers is free and open to the community, but RSVPs are required as lunch is provided. To register for the February event, please call 336-718-7300 or email Melissa Welch, mnwelch@novanthealth.org for more information.



Memory Makers Ornament Tree

Submitted photo

Resolve to protect yourself and your money in the New Year

BY ROBIN H HURDLE

I find that the new year offers an unusual foreshadowing of what the future can bring with its "20/20" vision. I like to think of this new year as the Year of Focus.

How can we put in place measures to safeguard our life savings? If you are retired and trying to be wise with your money, let's talk about the top scams that have taken thousands of dollars from many people like yourself.

Here I can speak from experience. One of the top scams that has swindled so many people is the "Grandparent Scam," which actually happened to my parents. They received a late-night phone call informing them that my son, their grandson, was in jail and he needed money and was afraid to call his parents. The caller even went so far as to have someone sounding like my son talk with them on the phone. You would think that they would know their own grandson's voice, but I believe in a highly emotional situation, they were caught off guard. The scammers scared my parents into acting immediately without thinking everything through.

The first red flag was that the payment had to be on a certain type of prepaid credit card. The second red flag was the increase in the amount once my parents paid the first payment. By the time I realized something was going on with my parents, it was too late. The money was gone. The scammers were untraceable. Neither the police nor the bank could get my parents' money back.

How can you make sure this doesn't happen to you? Here are a few simple tips:

*Have a family plan with the members of your family. Use a code word or phrase to question the authenticity of the caller. An example would be to ask the caller, "I thought you were at Uncle Rex's in Florida?" The truth is there is no uncle or anyone else in the family named

Rex. The caller will have to give you an answer and this should be a tell-tale sign if this is a scam.

*Secondly, make sure you write down their name, phone number and where they are saying they are calling from. If they claim to be with the police department, Social Security Administration or IRS, hang up, find the local phone number and call that number back—not the number they called you from. Never, and I mean NEVER give your Social Security number to someone claiming to be with the SSA or IRS. They will never contact you by phone.

*Email scams are also big. We have all heard about the guy in Nigeria needing help with a plane ticket or receiving an email that looks a lot like it is from your bank or credit card company. In this technical world, it only takes a few seconds for scammers to steal from you once they have valuable information. Always call your bank or credit card company to verify documentation in emails.

You can also find many informative articles on the Internet to help you to avoid being scammed. It would be a great public service if grocery stores, drug stores and other places that sell these types of prepaid credit cards would train their employees about the signs of someone possibly being scammed so they can alert the customer. Even a large warning sign about scams placed with the cards would be helpful.

If only my parents had taken the time to give it more thought, they would have known our sons are very close to us, so regardless as to what was going on, they would have called us first. Today scammers are high-tech savvy and very creative with their methods of extortion.

Be proactive. Be focused in 2020.

Robin Hurdle and her husband Scott own a small business and live in Davidson County with their three dogs.

The writer's corner

The Special Love of Sisters

BY DOROTHY E. D'ANNUNZIO

Sisters are really special.

I am the youngest of six girls. My daughter, however, being an only child, will never understand the complicated dynamics of having sisters ... and the pain of losing them.

On May 28, 2016, my sister Darlene, 73, passed away after a long illness. Fifty-four years earlier, to the day, we lost our mother at age 43. Somehow I knew Darlene was waiting for that day to leave us.

There was a time when we were as close as any two people can be. But like a lot of families, we grew apart, but I never stopped loving her. I am thankful that we were able to spend quality time together at the end. I think of her often and will always miss her.

On Christmas Day 2019, my sister Dolores passed away at the age of 76. Once again, I somehow knew she was waiting for that day to leave us. Two years ago she came to live with us in North Carolina and it was one of the best years of my life. It was also one of the most difficult. Her diabetes was out of control; her kidneys were failing; she needed to be watched constantly. I became her caregiver, her chauffeur, her card-playing partner, her movies mate. She called me her drill sergeant. She

cheated at cards then got mad at me when I won. Most of the movies we saw were what she wanted to see - I usually fell asleep. She would ask the most embarrassing questions, always when I was corralled in the car and couldn't avoid them. Almost everywhere we went, I would inevitably take a wrong turn. She would laugh and say it was a new area for us to see.

When her kidneys started to shut down, she refused dialysis and the decision was made to take her back home to Michigan to be with her children and grandchildren.

The last time I saw Dolores was in July 2019. She was healthy enough to know I was there and happy enough to eat the White Castle hamburgers I brought for her.

My remaining sisters are scattered around the country. One I see when I go back to Michigan. One I haven't seen since 1990, but we talk on the phone occasionally. One is completely out of my life. There's the complicated -sister dynamics.

The biggest lesson I have learned in life is, you cannot help someone who will not help themselves. We all make our own choices in life and in death.

And you can't pick your siblings. Just love them and laugh, either with them or at them.

Sisters really are special.

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