



Robin Barbetta, (left) of Milton, and her mother Nell, (centre), with a friend, can now spend better quality time together since her mother became a Centennial Manor resident. Mrs. Barbetta has overcome the stresses of being a full-time caregiver and realized seeking professional help is not admitting failure. (Photo submitted)

Caregivers often cause serious family problems

By LISA RUTLEDGE
Herald Special

It may be difficult for some to accept that taking care of an elderly parent can be overwhelming, said former caregiver Robin Barbetta. But caregivers should never think they are betraying a parent by seeking professional help.

As a 48-year-old mother of three, Mrs. Barbetta felt the crushing pressures of a sandwich generation between taking care of her husband and children and a mother who was rapidly deteriorating both physically and mentally.

Mrs. Barbetta took care of her now 79-year-old mother, Nell Cornacki, for two years, but the responsibilities became too great as Mrs. Barbetta was also a mother, a wife and held a part-time job.

Caring for her mother involved making sure she ate properly, took her medication and even watching that she didn't fall on the stairs.

Her mother spent time home alone and it reached a point where the children were nervous to come home fearing they would find their grandmother had fallen down the stairs, explained Mrs. Barbetta.

About six months later, a health department official suggested Mrs. Barbetta enroll her mother in a day program at Milton's Centennial Manor. Her mother visited the Manor two days a week for approximately a year.

"It gave her purpose to her day," said Mrs. Barbetta. Caregivers aren't doing anyone any favors by keeping their elderly parents at home. A year later, her mother became a full-time resident at the Manor.

The controlled atmosphere of the Manor, staffed by a team of professionals trained in geriatric care, provides a much safer setting, Mrs. Barbetta said. "No one can be a team all by themselves," she insisted. "We have to realize our personal limits."

Family relationships suffer when a member becomes a caregiver, said Mrs. Barbetta. "Caregivers become martyrs and place themselves last on the row doing everything and then there's nothing left," she said. When things become unbearable the caregiver may even take things out on someone else, she added.

Mrs. Barbetta maintains that tension may be created between the sons and daughters of the elderly parent if responsibilities are not equally shared. She said at times one can't help but wonder "When am I going to have time for myself - why at my house with my family?"

According to Mrs. Barbetta, no caregiver should suffer the guilt when asking these questions. Nor should they feel ungrateful upon

thinking back to when their parents raised and cared for them. "There's lots of help available," she said. "If there are qualified people out there to help - call them" she insisted.

Centennial Manor's caregiver support program, 'I Am Not Alone,' operating since January, provides an outlet for caregivers to discuss their frustrations, anger and feelings of guilt. Mrs. Barbetta attended many of the informal support gatherings to talk and share her experience and let other caregivers know they are not alone.

"There were a lot of tears shed at those meetings because they kept so much to themselves," remembers Mrs. Barbetta. She believes sharing her experience at the meetings was a valuable lesson because "we learn best from each other."

At the support group Mrs. Barbetta tried to ease the guilt weighing down on the shoulders of caregivers. "You shouldn't feel guilty about being frustrated," she said. She hoped to reassure caregivers they are not failures as children if they need professional assistance to take care of a parent.

Describing the household change after her mother became a Manor resident, Mrs. Barbetta said "I got my life back." Caregivers often feel obliged to return everything a parent gave to them, she said. But when caregivers have a spouse and children they feel the pressures of becoming parents in two senses, she explained.

With 24-hour professional care at the Manor, Mrs. Barbetta can spend more quality time with her mother.

"We do our nails, have coffee and a muffin. But when she was living at home I was running around doing laundry and answering phones and we didn't get to spend any time together," she said. Since visitors are welcome, at any time, one can choose the best time to visit, she added.

After years of inner turmoil Mrs. Barbetta was ready to let go as she realized there was nothing she could do to further help her mother. "It was a sense of relief," she said.

Adjusting to her mother's deteriorating mental state, she even understands when her mother occasionally doesn't recognize her. "You shouldn't be sensitive about it," she said adding that at this stage it doesn't matter as she loves her mother unconditionally. "That's maturity when you can give love without expecting anything back."

She encourages caregivers to seek help in order to get their own lives back because once caregivers give everything they can no longer help others. There comes a time

when a caregiver may have to let go, she explained.

Lauraine Andrews, a social worker at Centennial Manor and caregiver support group organizer, said there are still many people who won't come for help. "So often we feel that we have to do it all ourselves," she said.

Every person has many roles and each person must create a healthy balance between those roles, Mrs. Andrews explained. Many family members experience the role of caregiver at some point but they shouldn't let the situation reach a crisis point where it becomes unmanageable, she insisted. Caregivers may want to find an outside support link before a crisis point hits, she suggests.

Although extended families were traditional in the past, caregiving has become a much more demanding role today, Mrs. Andrews said. The population is living longer, both wife and husband work, and children are moving farther away from their parents.

The support group, which began as a pilot project in January, meets on the fourth Monday of every month, 7 p.m. at Pettit House in the Manor. Mrs. Andrews wants to encourage more caregivers and their relatives to join the support group to take advantage of the experience of others.

Individuals who have already been through the strains of being torn between caring for themselves and others can provide insight into role balancing.

Terri Paine, a psychogeriatric therapist at the North Halton Mental Health Cline, believes more caregivers should be aware of the community resources.

She sees at least one caregiver each week who is seeking medical assistance for a parent or spouse. Caregivers need to realize that their spouse or parent is not the same person. It's a traumatic experience when there is a role reversal. "If someone is very close with a parent and has had a very good relationship and all of a sudden loses that closeness it can be depressing," she said. She said it is important to remember the elderly may not understand when they are doing or saying.

Ms. Paine has made many referrals to the 'I Am Not Alone' caregiver program at the Manor, to promote support and prevent crisis. The purpose is to help caregivers realize they have to set limits, she said, because "they can't be everything to everybody."

There must be increased focus on services for the elderly because the seniors population is growing older and require care, she said, adding that younger generations are going to have to cope.

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