

The Last Time I saw Mary

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This is a follow-up article to *I Can't Tell you How Much I Love Living ... Where?* from the Summer 2005 newsletter, archived at www.elderhealth.org.

My mother-in-law passed away in January of this year. She was close to her 91st birthday. I got to know her some years before when she and her husband were still living in their home on Staten Island, New York.



Photo by: Lani O'Conner
& Kristina Goudey

Mary moved into a nursing home on Staten Island not too long after her husband died. I was overwhelmed by the enormity of the facility (596 beds) and the hallways filled with frail people. The elevators are so overloaded that you have to be extremely persistent to get to activities or plan for half an hour in transit. Despite all of these drawbacks, Mary did OK there in the beginning.

She was a wonderful social creature who enjoyed innumerable encounters with all kinds of people throughout her life. In her mid 80s she and her husband

went on a trip to New Orleans with my husband, Bob. As part of a package deal they got free drinks at the Voodoo Lounge in the French Quarter. If you've spent time in New Orleans you can imagine the type of people who show up for "Happy Hour" at the Voodoo Lounge. Mary made her way in and sat down next to some elaborately tattooed and pierced patrons and struck up a conversation. By the third night they were saving a spot for Mary at the table and welcoming her with open arms.

In the nursing home, she made new friends in the dayroom. She and a group of women laid claim to a table where a clear social hierarchy developed around cognitive functioning. Most of the women sitting at the table could carry on a conversation and Mary still had great social graces, even though her memory skills had significantly declined. Whenever we visited we spent many hours in that dayroom, usually bringing in cheesecake (Mary's favorite food) to share with everyone there. I still regret that I didn't sneak some cheesecake to one of the women who really wanted a taste. The nurse told me not to because this woman was a diabetic and that she would bring her some sugar free cookies. Of course the cookies never came.

Over time Mary's social skills declined and she no longer found her way to the dayroom, instead spending her time in the hallway just outside her room, propped up in a wheelchair. Bob and I noticed other dayroom friends now relegated to the hallways. They sat the entire day there, with Velcro straps across the front of their wheelchairs and their clothing equipped with alarms that would go off should they try to stand (a hybrid of risk management and fall prevention). Mary seemed afraid to go into the dayroom and unwilling to leave the nursing home for a meal, as we had done in the past.

On our last visit—cheesecake in hand—we persuaded her to revisit the dayroom for lunch. With its nice glass-topped tables and an atrium-like environment, it was the one pleasant place in the building. But house-keeping wanted to clean, so we were banned from that room. We managed to find our way outside and enjoy a special moment with Mary. The cheesecake provided a simple delight that was entirely renewable. Since she didn't remember from bite to bite that the cheesecake was there, she would say, "Oh is that cheesecake? Is there chocolate in it?" A few seconds later she would happen upon another taste: "Oh is that cheesecake!?"

We took her back to her parking spot in the hallway, where Bob recognized another elderly gentleman from the old neighborhood. He surveyed the hallways stacked with very frail people slumped over in wheelchairs and said, "It's like a warehouse for people waiting to die."

On the elevator down I asked a nurse if they were working on anything to change the environment there and she proudly pointed out their new innovation: color-coded staff. Pink scrubs are the CNAs, blue is maintenance and multi-color scrubs are the nurses. That way residents don't ask the wrong person to help them.

We need to do things differently. There are still way too many "warehouses" out there.

I recently spent a week at Buchanan Place, covering for ill staff members, and I marveled once again at the contrast from Mary's warehouse to this house. I was helping one of the women there get up and dressed in the morning. She was lamenting the fact that she couldn't do these things any more herself. "I'm helpless like a baby!"

I said, "It's funny—you raised eight kids who needed lots of help to grow up, and when people get old they sometimes need lots of help. I'm helping you now and I hope someone will be there to help me." She said, "You're right, honey, that's just the way it is with life, God will bless you."