

By Patricia Phillips, Chair of Lifespan's Board of Directors
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I landed the most important job I'll ever have without filling out an application, without even one interview. The process started when I received a phone call in the middle of a Pampered Chef party that I was hosting in my home. The voice on the other end said, "You'd better get over here right away; mom fell and is very disoriented. She isn't behaving normally." I grabbed my friend's car keys, as hers was the last car in the crowded driveway, and I raced over to my mom's house, only one mile away. From the moment I walked in the door, my relationship with my mom would never be the same. I would now become my mom's caregiver.

From my volunteer work for Lifespan, a not-for-profit agency that helps older adults and caregivers take on the challenges and opportunities of longer life, I was aware that many caregivers are similarly "born" out of singular, seemingly benign events: a grandparent falls and breaks a hip. An elderly parent's chronic cold turns into pneumonia. Still other caregivers are "born" more slowly, evolving into their roles as aging parents need more and more support to remain independent in their homes. Help frequently starts with simple things like amusing phone calls at 10:00 pm when our technology-challenged relatives need help figuring out their television remote control devices. Later the needs are more complex; sorting out medications, shopping, cooking and transportation. In spite of all of this knowledge from my volunteer work, I was not prepared for the toll that my new role would take on my emotions, family and work relationships.

With the help of my mom's loving family, we initially tried to "go it alone" after she was released from her six week stay in the hospital and rehabilitation center. We took turns visiting my mom twice a day in her home, helping her with medication, meals, and bathing. Three weeks, and another fall later, I quit my job to be with mom, and turned to professionals for help. Lifespan provided me with a list of qualified home health aides and, later, hospice care providers. They also provided guidance on the installation of grab bars and tub transfer chairs. Through their referrals we found an experienced, compassionate aide who taught us how to keep our mom safe and well-cared for in her home: my mother's main goal. Simple advice like keeping a medication journal, and insight on how to care for our mom's delicate skin made all the difference in the world. Lifespan's financial advice from unbiased professionals who had nothing to sell, no agenda to "push," helped us sort out the blizzard of insurance, tax and estate planning questions that seemed to crop up on a daily basis.

Most caregivers don't even recognize themselves as such. They are merely responsible sons and daughters, nieces, grandchildren or neighbors, "doing what's right" to help ailing relatives and friends. During this month, National Family Caregiver Recognition Month, please take a minute to look around and identify these exhausted, silent and often invisible angels amongst us – the caregivers. Reach out and offer support. Help them connect to the many fine services that are

designed to keep them sane and well-functioning in their most important role of caregiver to their loved ones.

My mom has been gone for 2 and ½ years now, and I still miss her everyday. Holding her hand in her own home as she passed from this world to the next was the most meaningful moment of my life, and one that could never have happened without the kindness and support of family, friends, and an amazing network of caring professionals in Monroe County.