

Unforgettable Journey

By Sharon Bohnert



Sharon Bohnert and her father Ray Mateja.

“My memory is not what it used to be.”

I can't tell you how many times over the past several years I've heard this statement from my father. I always reply with a laugh and a surprised sounding “really??!!” But in truth, his deteriorating memory has led my family on an unforgettable journey, one that has impacted me personally in ways I would have never imagined.

It's been ten years since my father was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. During this time, I have not only witnessed the progression of this terrible disease, but have also seen how rapidly the caretaking demands increase. In the beginning, my siblings and I would help as much as possible by staying with Dad so my mother could run some necessary errands or just have a much needed break. After a while, we took Dad to an “Adult Day Care,” allowing my mother some “days off.” But within a few years, it was clear to all of us that, for everyone's sake, we needed to find long-term care.

Looking back now, I'm amazed by how clueless we were when my family began our search. We spent countless hours scouring the yellow pages, searching the Internet, and trying to find anyone who may personally know of a place. We had no idea that different communities provided different levels of care. We had no idea what a community would cost or what financial resources we could use to pay for it. We had no idea if a community could immediately accept my father, or if we would be placed on a waiting list. We had no idea which communities, if any, would allow Dad to continue some of his lifelong hobbies, such as gardening. Basically, we had no idea about many things, and this not only cost us a lot of time, but caused an incredible amount of stress.

Through a lot of hard work, and a lot of luck, we found a place for Dad that not only became his home, but the people there became our second family. But in three short years, due to the advancement of the Alzheimer's as well as financial reasons, we needed to move Dad to a skilled nursing facility. Once again, we were faced with the daunting task of finding long-term care, only this time, with different requirements.

Dad has been in long-term care now for the past six years. Not only have I gotten to know other Alzheimer's patients, but also many of their families. Whenever we speak about our search for Alzheimer's care, it always seems like we're trading “war stories.” In most cases, the experience

is overwhelming and the families are physically and emotionally exhausted.

They say that necessity breeds invention, and it certainly has in my case. After seeing and experiencing the need for help in finding senior living, this past year I started Home to Home. Home to Home is a senior living referral service that personally assists seniors and their families as they search for assisted living, Alzheimer's care, and retirement communities in the Louisville and Southern Indiana area. Home to Home's aim is to relieve some of the time and stress involved in finding senior living, while providing the families with all their options so that the best choice can be made. Since I can personally attest to the financial commitment of senior living, Home to Home's services are offered to the seniors and their families at no charge. Instead, my partnered communities pay me a fee when I bring them a senior who moves in.

These past ten years have certainly been filled with their share of trials and tribulations. But in many ways, I have been fortunate. My dad still recognizes me, and although he may not remember my name, he knows I belong to him. Dad has never wavered from the gentleman he has always been, still worried about holding out the chair for me and offering me any of his food or drink before having some himself. And now with Home to Home, I am able to follow my passion and help those on paths I have already been down. What a truly unforgettable journey this has been.

Sharon Bohnert is the owner of Home to Home (www.hometohomeservices.com) and started the business as a result of her father's Alzheimer's Disease.



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