Our Mother’s Final Home

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I am one of three sisters, all in our sixties, who have had a crash course in what it takes to care for an aging parent. We wanted our Mother to come live with one of us, but she was adamant about being independent and not becoming a burden. Eventually, she moved into an assisted living facility where her sister already had an apartment.

Even though we lived far away, we spent as much time as possible with Mother, often sleeping on an air mattress in her apartment. After a fall which resulted in a traumatic head injury precipitating dementia, she bravely carried on with rheumatoid arthritis, various other health problems and hospitalizations. We burned-up phone lines, the internet and formed quite a team as we coordinated doctor visits, physical therapist appointments, medications, insurance, finances and scheduling caregivers to help when we could not be there.

Mother was quite active at the time; she was able to walk the long halls with her trusted walker without even getting out of breath. A month and a half after her 91st birthday, she was hospitalized and almost died.

After her hospital stay, she went to rehab and then entered long-term care. About this time Mother told us she wanted to die. She was terribly weak, couldn’t sit up by herself in bed and was barely eating or drinking, so she was placed under palliative care.

Up to this point our story is like countless others. Our mother had lived a good and long life, she had lovingly cared for her family and two wonderful husbands. Now she and her large family were preparing for her death. But now our story changes; it all has to do with how our Mother will live in the remaining time God gives her.

Mother was bravely trying to hide how lost she felt and how unforgiving the care was in the nursing home. After a moment of what she would consider a weakness, Mother began to voice her concerns and frustration and informed us of her experiences. She told us that if she asked for help with a simple task, the aides would often look at her as if she wasn’t worth their time.

We knew right then that we had to move her. But, there was no time to start hunting for another place from scratch. We decided to visit a group home which friends had referred us to. Both had placed their fathers there and absolutely loved the place. We called right away and asked to visit. Within two days, we had moved Mother out of institutionalized care and into her new life! I have to say we felt like we were rescuing her. Mother could not wait to get out of that “reputable” facility.

When she first arrived, she slept a lot for several days, stating often ‘how quiet and peaceful this place is’, and ‘how kind and loving everyone is’. Each day there were little changes. She loves to put on her lipstick again and go to the table to eat with the other five ladies. In Mother’s new home, the bedrooms for the ladies opened into common areas with warmly and comfortably decorated living rooms and dining room. They have spa in the morning and fix hair like a beauty shop, paint fingernails if wanted and everyone is dressed for the day. The meals are prepared right in the kitchen and served at a dining room table, family-style. Some of the ladies have dementia; they are quite nice, agreeable and easy to get along with. They have much in common, living like a group of old friends.

So, what is it about this amazing place? What is the main factor, the big difference that gave our mother renewed joy in life and a sense of dignity? Quite simply it is a matter of love and respect. They receive the kind of care which a loving family would give. It happens here every day. That is the amazing factor!

Mother looks years younger and is a beautiful sight to behold! I am convinced she wouldn’t have lived long had she stayed in the long-term-care facility (which was known as one of the best in the area). Mother laughs and talks and makes little jokes. She is simply happy to be in a quiet, peaceful, loving place. Everything in her new home is close and family-sized rather than impersonal and down a long, busy hallway. I don’t live far from the home and it’s a wonderful thing to be able to visit frequently!

After experiencing pretty much the full gamut of assisted living, rehab, and long-term care facilities, my sisters and I now know what kind of place we would like to live at once we grow old:

A group home, a real home where residents (and their families), essentially form a co-operative to share caregiving expenses. Visiting physicians, home health and hospice agencies are also welcome, making it a place with all the care, yet at the same time it is a homey, comfortable, safe place. This model works beautifully. Our mother’s peaceful, happy face tells the whole story.

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