

Aging Happens: Most meaningful compensation can be saying ‘thank you’

By Ellen Waldman

June 20, 2018

If you were to ask me who has the hardest job in the field of aging, I’m going to say the caregivers, unequivocally. In particular, it’s the people who go to work every day caring for your family members, friends or yourself. Family caregivers also have it tough, but those who are not related by blood or marriage are doing something quite amazing, I think.

They often do not get the recognition they deserve. They do all the chores for someone who most of us might grimace at. If their client has dementia, they might get verbally abused, spit on, pinched or otherwise physically injured. They might knock on someone’s door and be told to “go away, I don’t need any help,” or that they stole their red dress from the closet. All of these are true encounters I’ve heard from the caregivers I have known over the years.

It seemed like a good idea to actually talk with one of the long-serving caregivers I know, Guille Calderon, who has been doing this work for 14 years. She started working with an agency, then ventured out on her own. She’s had a lot of experience and training over all these years.

EW: What would you like to let families know?

GC: Being introduced into people’s lives takes time. At first, the family should be there when a new caregiver is brought in. They are not always automatically accepted. It helps to introduce them as a family friend. The caregiver will then develop trust with a client who is fearful. Providing care depends on developing this trust. It takes time and can be upsetting for the person to have someone they don’t know or trust in their home.

EW: What’s difficult about this role?

GC: Not being valued, respected and supported by families. Caregiving becomes the main support to their parent’s life and is not always noticed. Caregivers are also forgotten after their client dies. They grieve the loss of their friend, too.

EW: What makes this hard for clients?

GC: They feel afraid, because a caregiver represents that they need help, just because they’re there. It creates a lot of stress for them that they can’t do the things for themselves they used to do. They are sensitive to this. You need to be aware of them wanting to remain independent.

EW: What are the rewards and benefits?

GC: Feeling welcomed when the caregiver walks in the door. Gaining trust, love and respect. Being there to make their lives easier. Becoming part of their family: the “safe person.”

EW: What advice would you give to caregivers?

GC: Be very patient; have a sense of loyalty and respect for the elder; be a good communicator; be kind; take care of yourself, this is a stressful job.

How can a family show their gratitude to the often challenging work that caregivers provide? It's obvious that the care recipient with dementia often does not acknowledge their services. Here's how one local family generously and gratefully express their gratitude to their mother's caregivers.

First of all, and simply, they thank them, all the time, in emails and phone calls. And they mean it.

Then, they compensate them with a salary that meets the level of care they are providing to their loved one. This would be considered an above-average wage for this care in this Valley. They show their appreciation in other ways as well. When their mother was out of town, they paid their caregivers as if they were working that week; hence, a type of paid vacation. They gave generous holiday gifts to all.

I know not everyone can offer this type of compensation. But for those who can, it shows a deep understanding of what these dedicated people provide in care and support to our lives. These families also receive email updates on the daily activities of their loved one and avoid most crises. This is peace of mind for everyone, and it makes good sense to compensate for this.

Here's a link to a trailer for a documentary that came out last year where native Oregonian Tony Heriza explores the economics of in-home care workers lives in the documentary "Care": bit.ly/2K5rx28.

From the film's site: "This intimate documentary pulls back the curtain on the poignant and largely hidden world of in-home eldercare. Beautifully shot and deeply moving, the film reveals the bonds that form between paid care workers and elders — and exposes the cracks in a system that is currently failing both".

Keeping a positive touch on this, let's agree to find a way to thank those who provide this much needed service for our aging loved one. Start with a sincere thank you, and go from there.