Preserving Dignity and Sense of Worth in Older Adults

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This story is written by a 90-year-old World War II veteran who is revered by both his family and his community, including his nurse and other health professionals who supervise his care. His wife passed away several years ago, but because of the devotion of his family and his engagement with the community, a 24-hour network of care has been arranged, and he is able to remain in his home. For example, his professional caregivers taught him to draw up and administer his own insulin to control his diabetes. He and his wife had nine children, and one of them is a nurse. His family members take turns staying with him around the clock on weekends (Friday through Sunday), and they have hired a caregiver who stays with him for the other four days and nights. His remarkable story, told in his own words, follows below.

MEMORIES OF A WORLD WAR II VETERAN

Written by John Merrill McDaniel, just before his 90th birthday

Verbatim, this is the speech that I am going to give at the Wall of Fame Ceremony at an upcoming event in the Sherburne-Earlville School in upstate New York. This event is for individuals who attended Sherburne School and have been somewhat successful, and I feel greatly honored to be invited to speak. I attended Sherburne School and graduated in 1938 at the age of 16 with a college entrance diploma to be used at any college, but I did not go to college. First I went in on my father’s newspaper, then World War II started and I enlisted in the Army. I ended up in the Pacific Theater with a Combat Engineer outfit. We were quite an outfit, and received many awards, “fruit salad” (the ribbons and medals that were awarded and pinned to the soldiers’ uniforms), and combat stripes.

We were with the famed war correspondent Ernie Pyle when he was killed on the little island of La Shima off the coast of Okinawa. I was also honored to receive the Silver Star for “Gallantry in Action,” which is the second highest award that the U.S. government gives to a combat soldier.

After the War, I returned home and went back into business with my father. In 1953, I was elected Town Clerk for the town of Sherburne and held the position for 56 years—more than half a century. In 1950, I met a wonderful woman, and we got married. We had nine children, six boys and three girls, all of whom attended college and are now very successful in their ventures.

In 2007, my wife and I were chosen by the people of Sherburne to be “Citizens of the Year,” and 3 years ago I was Honorary Chairman of the Rotary Christmas Parade. Last year, I was named “Person of the Day” at the annual Pageant of Bands, sponsored by the Sherburne Fire Department and School. This is a yearly event, and every year 35 to 40 school bands converge on Sherburne for
a 3-day musical contest, and on Saturday afternoon, there is a large parade with all the bands. I was very fortunate to lead the parade in a “top down” driven by the town’s Tax Assessor. I have also been on Channel 9 television three separate times, being recognized for what I have done for the town. All of these prestigious events were a great honor to me and make me feel like my life was worth something.

My six sons are all hunters. We go to Maryland, in the Chesapeake Bay, for duck hunting, and every fall we go to South Dakota for pheasant hunting. We used to go by jet, but it’s been sold and is no longer available. Now we go in two vans and the others by air. We have been going there for 16 years, but one of my sons, Tom, got tired of having to call for reservations, so he finally bought a ranch out there so we now have a home to live in when we go there. We started with 7 people going, and now we have 13, including my grandsons. All of this keeps me young.

I am now semi-retired from the newspaper business. My son and his wife have taken over and have a successful printing business. This July, I will turn 90 years old, and I still have a lot to do. I thank the good Lord every day for what he has given to me and my family.

NURSING REFLECTIONS

As nurses, we are sometimes in a position to help older adults, such as John McDaniel, find the help they need to remain in their homes, among the precious artifacts of their life, even when they are 90 and older. Clearly, it is the right thing for this still engaged and remarkably independent man. It allows him to keep purpose in life and socialization, both of which are known to be associated with longevity and decreased likelihood of Alzheimer’s disease (McClowry, 2006). Of course, it would not have been possible if his family (in this case, a large and deeply devoted family) had not also committed to preserving his sense of independence and prepared to do whatever it takes to make that happen.

Globally, older adults are living longer, and it is imperative that both society and health care professionals explore innovative care giving arrangements that make it possible for them to live those extra years with a continuing sense of pride and worth. Above all, it is imperative that we enable them to remain integral with their family and community, and engaged in life. Nurses are often in a good position to help make that happen.

REFERENCE


ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Gueldner is Garvin Professor of Nursing, Frances Payne Bolton School of Nursing, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio. John Merrill McDaniel is a World War II veteran, recipient of the Silver Star, and former newspaper editor, Sherburne, New York. Sadly, Mr. McDaniel passed away May 30, 2012—just 11 days before his 91st birthday.

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