In 1958, a movie starring Rosalind Russell was released: Auntie Mame (DaCosta, 1958). Mame was a flamboyant, fun-loving woman. During that time, my mom, Marie, was employed by a government agency as an executive secretary. She had the reputation as the best-dressed woman in the building; her outfits perfectly coordinated, including shoes and handbag. The beautiful wardrobe coupled with her effervescent personality and love of singing (she frequently was asked to sing at office celebrations) earned her the nickname “Flaming Mame” from her coworkers. My dad, working in the mailroom, knew some of her coworkers and heard about “Flaming Mame.” Over the years, we heard many “Flaming Mame” stories from my parents.

Fifty-one years later, Mom is now 89 years old and in the moderate stage of dementia, and Dad is 83 years old with failing health due to chronic obstructive pulmonary disorder. Due to Mom’s worsening dementia and Dad’s failing health, we made the difficult decision to place her in a skilled nursing center. My dad visits daily. He wants the nursing staff to know who she was before her dementia; thus, he tells the aides about her kind and generous nature, great sense of humor, and love of cooking and music. He also tells them about “Flaming Mame.”

As my mom’s dementia worsened, she had episodes of irritability, refused care, and even chased staff out of her room. One day, when she was having difficulty, her aide asked, “Flaming Mame, what’s wrong?”

My mom stopped fussing and asked, “How do you know my other name?”

The answer from the nursing staff was usually “We heard all about ‘Flaming Mame’ from Jim [i.e., my dad]. Are you ‘Flaming Mame?’”

She would begin to laugh and talk about her job, meeting my dad, and how she loved to sing. Many times she would begin to sing some of the old songs from those days. This became a therapeutic technique for the nursing staff to distract and redirect Mom. This approach succeeded most of the time. When she did not respond to this technique and remained resistant, staff would communicate the change in her mood or behavior to one another by saying, “Mame is flaming.” They knew that when she was “flaming” she needed time and space; she would eventually calm down.

I have been a geriatric nurse practitioner for 23 years; most of my work has been in long-term care and rehabilitation. Many times, management of behavioral and psychological symptoms of distress in dementia may be accomplished without medications. This approach usually begins with getting to know the patient and finding meaning in behavior (Fick, DiMeglio, McDowell, & Mathis-Halpin, 2013; Kolanowski, Van Haitsma, Resnick, & Boltz, 2014); I have seen it work well for many patients throughout my career. I understand, now on a much deeper level, why the approach may work. The emotional impact a story can have on the interpersonal relationship of resident, staff, and family can be powerful. The particular story of “Flaming Mame” struck a chord with the staff and, to their credit, they use it to connect with Mom at an emotional level. For Mom and Dad, “Flaming Mame” is a fond and
fun memory that reminds them of their youth
and courtship. For her children, it is a story we
recall with humor and pride.

“Flaming Mame” is particularly significant
for my dad and brother. They had a difficult time
managing mom’s “flaming” behaviors. “Flaming
Mame” became a way to help my family con-
nect with the person Mom used to be with the
person she had become. It is a common thread for
the staff and our family—a thread that alleviates
my mom’s anxiety as well as some of ours. We
can laugh together about Mame and reminisce
about her life. When she is “flaming,” we learn
from each other (staff and family) about how to
manage her behaviors.

Mom has since declined cognitively and does
not remember “Flaming Mame” as well. She does
not tell stories anymore, but continues to sing.

The staff still know that when she is “flaming”
she needs time and space. She wanders in her
wheelchair throughout the building, trying to
get “home.” Everyone in the center knows her as
“Flaming Mame.”

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