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Tender, Loving Care

How home care help has changed life for one Lamorinda couple

Laurie Snyder



The love story of Bruce and Bea Cunningham, now in their 80s, began when Bea met Bruce, who was rooming with her brother at San Jose State University. Photo Ohlen Alexander

Take Bea Cunningham. Readers may remember Bea and her husband, Bruce, as Moraga's 2003 Citizens of the Year, the first duo ever so honored by town leaders. Bruce guided and groomed generations of current and future community leaders - as a baseball coach and Boy Scout troop leader, and as the president and district governor for Kiwanis. Bea served on the Parks and Recreation Commission and as the president of Moraga Women's Society, raising funds for everything from an Oakland homeless shelter to annual scholarships for Campolindo girls. Up until last year, she helped coordinate Moraga's annual 4th of July dog parade.

Their lives changed, though, after Bruce had two strokes. His speech ultimately wasn't affected - but his walking was. He went from wheelchair to walker to cane with the help of his physical therapist (PT). But after he came home from rehabilitation, he grew increasingly reluctant to exercise - something that often happens with stroke survivors. So, Bea brought in PT help. It was expensive, though, so she tried PT assistants - but they weren't a good fit.

Bea's days would have been hard for someone twice her size and half her age - assisting Bruce from bed to wheelchair to the shower before helping him dress and make his way down their L-shaped staircase. Three years ago, Bea realized she was also answering more and more questions for Bruce during their interactions with others. They saw a doctor who noted he might have mild dementia.

Although their children were relatively close by and willing to help, Bea wanted them to be free to live their own lives. After a failed experience with one local home care agency Bea found Senior Helpers in Moraga. "There are 'caregivers,'" says Bea, "and there are care givers."

Kevin Reneau, CSA of Senior Helpers arranged for Kim Polen to help the Cunninghams on weekdays. Now, Polen arrives early each morning, gets a briefing from Bea regarding Bruce's status, and helps Bea move Bruce from bed to wheelchair before taking over to assist him with bathing and dressing for the day.

Thanks to the installation of various assistive devices, including an electric stair lift, it's now easier for Bruce to transition to daily activities downstairs. Bea and Bruce eat breakfast while Polen does light housework; then, Polen leads Bruce through leg lifts and other exercises which improved his stamina in just one month's time. His increasing strength makes it easier for Bea when she re-assumes the role of primary caregiver around noon on weekdays and all day Saturdays and Sundays.

Polen helps Bruce maintain his memory with puzzles and with Jeopardy and other brain-teasing television programs. Meanwhile, Bea recharges her batteries - mentally and physically. It's easier to get to the grocery store and ophthalmologist; she even finds time to lunch again with her friends of 70 years. "Kim is what my kids wanted for me - someone to take the pressure off," says Bea.

A former pre-school teacher, Polen has an obvious soft spot for Bruce. "He's got a great sense of humor; he really makes me laugh," she says. Polen urges readers who might be living alone to arrange for Life Alert and for anyone caring for a loved one to "consider having someone from a home care agency come in to help. There's

Aging is not for amateurs. Joints crackle and pop. Progressive lenses only seem to make eyes progressively worse. Previously subtle snoring becomes an earth-shaking rumble. But as indignities go, these pale in comparison to Mother Nature's most wicked curveballs.

According to a report published in The Journal of the Alzheimer's Association, "People with Alzheimer's and other dementias who live alone are exposed to higher risks - including inadequate self-care, malnutrition, untreated medical conditions, falls, wandering from home unattended and accidental deaths." As many as half do not have identifiable caregivers, and it is estimated that one in seven with Alzheimer's - roughly 800,000 Americans - are living alone.

Even when a caregiver is present and a loved one's declines are mostly physical rather than cognitive, the toll taken on those serving as primary caregivers can quickly overwhelm. According to familycaregiving101.org, the dawning awareness often begins when your "mood is sometimes upbeat - you're proud you've been able to provide such wonderful care and make decisions that support your care recipient's best wishes," but you begin noticing a longing "for the days before caregiving. And, you're tired."

nothing to be afraid of."

Bea counsels readers to begin planning now. Life can change in an instant, but with a bit of planning, life can still be golden.

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