

The Story of Friends for Life

I was visiting my father in the hospital one day when I heard a woman screaming. I went to see what was wrong and found a woman who was close to ninety years old. She was crying. She said, "I'm dying and I don't want to die alone, please don't leave me!" I stayed and listened while she told me her life story. She was a college graduate who worked as a librarian for 50 years. She had both children and grandchildren. But while she was sick, in a hospital 200 miles away from her nearest family, no one was coming to see her. She was convinced



this meant she was dying. If she were going to live, her family would still be coming to see her. The thought of dying alone absolutely terrified her.

I gave her a stuffed animal and flowers and read from my Bible to her. Mostly, I just listened to her. She decided I wouldn't be doing all that if she were dying. In a short time, she got well and went home.

After I visited her, the nurses asked, "Since you visited this lady that you didn't know, would you go see a lady on the fourth floor who is all alone?" So, I also brought her a stuffed animal, visited with her, and she got well enough to go home. Then they asked, "There is someone on the second floor who has no family, could you check on her, too?"

As God made me aware of more elderly people who needed help – people who were without family, I kept thinking that the help they needed already existed – somewhere. For months it seemed that every time I picked up a newspaper, listened to the radio or watched television, I heard about elder abuse, neglect or exploitation. I learned that over half of the people in nursing home never had a single visitor. I also learned that over half of the elderly people who were living alone, needing help, weren't getting any help at all – from anyone. I heard more about the elderly in those few months than ever before.

I searched for an organization that would give the elderly a support system when there was no family or when family could not meet the needs. When I couldn't find anything, I started Friends for Life.

“Did You Know My Wife Died?”

I got a call one day from the activity director at a nursing home. She said, “There is a man here who is going to die, I think, if you can't help him.” She explained that his wife died. His children came to town, moved him out of his home and into the nursing home



and held her funeral service without him. He lost his wife, his home and total control of his life in a single twenty four hours period. He wanted to die. He just lay on his bed, staring out the window, refusing to eat – refusing to do anything.

I sent a volunteer to see him. Later that day, she came by my office. She told me she had talked for two hours to him and had completely run out of things to say. Then he turned to her and asked, “Did you know my wife died?” She said, “Yes”. He started to cry. As he told her the whole story, they began a friendship that lasted many years.

Mother's Day

About a month before our first Mother's Day at Friends for Life, I got a call from a nursing home. Could we provide corsages for all the female residents? Well, I had no money and didn't even know how to make a corsage. At that point I was still the only employee, although technically I wasn't even yet an employee since there was no money to pay me. I mention this only to make it clear that not only did Friends for Life not have any money, I didn't have any money either. The



nursing home activity director continued explaining to me how painful Mother's Day is for the residents. If a woman has children who cannot come to visit, she is very sad. If a woman has never had children, she is sad. If she has outlived her children, this is a hard time. I

said, “Okay, we can do this.” Then I hung up the phone thinking, “How are we going to do this?”

As the Friday before Mother’s Day arrived, I still had no money, no flowers and no way to get either. I also had no idea how to turn flowers into corsages if I did get some. I went to my husband’s office and shared my discouragement. He said, “Inez, get your mind back on your ministry and everything will be all right.” I said, “Okay, then I am going to Wolfe Nursery.”

I am not sure why I thought they would have corsage parts, but I went anyway and gathered up everything I thought might turn into a corsage in the hands of someone who knew how to make one. I was trying to think of some way to explain that I had no money when the cashier at the register said, “Are you Inez Russell with Friends for Life?” I managed to say ‘yes’ and he said, “there is someone here looking for you”.

“I don’t think so” I said. “I don’t think anyone even knows I am here.” But the cashier insisted, “Someone is looking for you and you need to go find her.” The lady the cashier described was named Doris, and when I found her she said, “I asked God this morning who to give this money to and He told me to come find you.” With that, she handed me forty dollars and left. I went back to the cashier and he rang up my flower parts. The total was \$39.94!

I poured out the contents of the sacks onto a table in the office building. Flowers, green tape, stems, leaves spilled out. I just sat there staring at them. I looked up to see an elderly lady standing in the doorway. “What are you doing?” she asked. “I am trying to figure out how to make a corsage.” To my amazement, she said, “I love to make corsages. Can I help?” Several more ladies came that afternoon to help me make all the corsages and they even delivered them to the nursing home.

Stuffed Animals

I sent dozens of girls from a sorority at Baylor University to a nursing home one day to deliver stuffed animals to the ladies and balloons to the men. Later that day, I received a call from the social worker at the nursing home. She said, “Inez, I have to tell you something that happened after the girls left.”

She told me that one of the men went to one of the women and said, “Do you want that animal?”

“Why are you asking?”

“Because if you don’t want it, I do”.

“What do you want it for?”

“I thought I’d put it on my bed.”

“Well, go on, take it!”

The social worker said, “I have been by



that man's room several times this afternoon and each time I pass by I see him sitting on his bed hugging that little stuffed animal.”

Saving for a Rainy Day

In our first year at Friends for Life, we were asked to be the legal guardian for a man who had been found unconscious on a railroad track. He was living in a shed about the size of my office (which was pretty tiny). There was no electricity and no running water. He lost consciousness because he was sick – from exposure and poor nutrition. It turned out that he had quite a lot of money – hundreds of thousands of dollars in banks that he was saving for a ‘rainy day’. He just did not realize it was raining. We became his guardian so he could get the care that he

needed. What a delightful man he turned out to be. I remember that he asked us to take him to get new frames for his glasses. He was quite specific. He did not want new lenses. They were just fine. He had broken his frames when



he fell onto the railroad track. He just needed new frames. He wanted to go back to his optometrist. He knew exactly where the office was, even though he had not been there in over fifty years! Fortunately, the son of his optometrist had taken

over the practice and still had his records. He was right about the lenses. The prescription had not changed!

One Thousand Dollars for Lunch

I received a call from Adult Protective Services in a neighboring county. “I know you don’t serve our county, but we have an elderly lady who is starving to death. There is no one else to take care of her. I’ll understand if you can’t help.” I called each of our board members. They all agreed that we should help. Left alone, this lady would starve to death. She was writing checks, large checks (many as much as a thousand dollars) to strangers who came to her door, begging them to bring her food. Some brought her food, some just took the money.



Her hip had disintegrated and she could not move without excruciating pain. She could not care for herself or her dogs. She had a brother, but he lived on the other side of the world. We got her a new hip, a safe place to live and people to take care of her.

*We Can't Understand
Anything She Says*

I never heard of Huntington's Disease until I met an tiny, elderly lady who had this horrible disease. It is a degenerative brain disorder that affects a person's ability to walk, talk and think.



Victims shake uncontrollably. I remember standing in her living room talking to her because I did not want to sit down. It was one of many 'awful' houses that got that way because our clients were not able to take care of themselves or their homes.

A grant from the city would make all the repairs that she needed for her house, but the contractors refused to do the work unless we would provide an interpreter. Her disease had slowly taken away her ability to speak clearly. The disease had progressed to the point that it seemed impossible to understand anything she said. Fortunately, I had one employee who understood her so we were able to work with contractors to get the work done on her house.

We helped her get new 'slightly used' furniture to replace the 'awful' stuff. I was especially pleased when we were able to replace her dining room suite. It was just a board resting on saw horses. She was so unsteady on her feet that she

constantly fell against it and, of course, it would fall and so would she. We found a used dinette set that didn't fall down when she leaned against it.

One day we told her we would pick her up to take her to buy new shoes. It had been a very long time since she had new shoes and she was very excited. When we got there, she had dozens of tiny cuts on her legs from trying to shave with very unsteady hands.

She loved to go places. When we took her to the doctor, she would ask to ride by the lake. In fact, wherever we took her we had to allow extra time to ride by the lake.

She was a bright woman who loved her independence and with our help she was able to stay independent for a very long time – in spite of her illness.

Cooking on a Space Heater



She was given a turkey for the holidays, but she didn't have a stove. She really wanted to have a Christmas dinner, so she wrapped the turkey in foil and cooked it for twenty two hours on her space heater. This lady's house was falling down around her with plumbing leaking so badly that in order to bathe her, her home health care worker had to turn the water on at the street,

heat the water in a coffee pot, fill the tub with water, bathe her, and then go back out to the street to turn the water off. She owed money to loan companies – lots of loan companies. In fact, \$390 of her \$420 a month income was supposed to go to loan companies. It took us almost two years to help her pay off all her bills, but every loan company was paid. We got a grant for her to fix up her house, including a stove (no more cooking on the space heater).

I kneeled down beside her wheel chair one day and she said, “I prayed God would send someone to help me and I know God sent you to me.”

To protect the confidentiality of our clients, we did not use their pictures in these stories.