

Media Release

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It's a man's world: Serving as caregiver for the woman he loves

In the May/June issue of AARP The Magazine, Gail Sheehy writes about what she calls the secret caregivers—men who are caring for a seriously ill spouse or parent. Three in 10 U.S. households now have an unpaid caregiver, bringing the total to more than 65 million, according to a 2009 report from the National Alliance for Caregiving in collaboration with AARP, and a third of those are men.

For anyone who considers the role of caregiving a woman's domain—this comes as a surprise. Women are known for taking care of hands-on duties such as bathing, administering medications, and the kinds of tasks one associates with taking care of an infant, while men are more likely to arrange for home health care or consult the insurance company about coverage.

Some men have greatness thrust upon them, as Shakespeare wrote in "Twelfth Night," and that is particularly true of male caregivers. A health condition can turn suddenly, transforming any family member into an instant caregiver. That can cause panic and even resentment, particularly for a man accustomed to his wife cooking, grocery shopping and cleaning up for him.

But many families are now coming together and deciding what each of them—husbands, sons and daughters—can do to help provide the care their loved one needs.

Jim Weist, who lives in Montechoa, and his two sons are only too glad to care for the woman who used to take care of them. Married nearly 64 years, Jim says his wife Lucille, who has Alzheimer's disease, "was an absolutely wonderful woman. She took really good care of me. But now I'm doing the same for her; it's reversed now.

"As a male, I wasn't trained to do any of that," he adds. But his grandmother had almost as much knowledge as a doctor about keeping people healthy. "So it's come naturally to me, I guess."

When they celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary, Lu had begun to have trouble remembering what to do while cooking, then dressing and bathing herself. Over time, she has forgotten how to do even the simplest things like chewing her food, and Jim can't get her to eat. She recognizes Jim as her caregiver but doesn't always know his name. Her memory is gone.

Jim, 84, has health problems of his own—quintuple bypass surgery and two stents, the loss of a kidney, and a pacemaker. He trusts that their sons, one of whom lives next door and the other three miles west, will care for Lu if something happens to him. The family is determined to care for Lu at home.

“I don’t mind, as long I can do it,” Jim says. “I’m just happy to be alive to take care of her. I’m still here 100 percent, and I’m going to be here.”

Haven Hospice provides the support that family members who are caregivers need during a critical time. These include our Healing Hearts grief counseling services; Haven Transitions, which offers assistance, resources and companionship to individuals and their caregivers who are coping with a life-limiting illness; and respite care for patients in our four inpatient care centers. For more information, call 1.800.727.1889.

Editor’s Note: Lucille Weist passed away June 30.

About Haven Hospice

Haven Hospice is North Florida’s expert in end-of-life and palliative care and is one of three 2008 Circle of Life Award® winners nationwide to be recognized as leaders in improving the care of patients near the end of life or with life-threatening conditions. Haven Hospice has also been recognized as a Florida Pacesetter for its leadership in promoting living wills. Haven Hospice has served nearly 50,000 patients and families since 1979 and has been licensed in Florida as a not-for-profit hospice since 1980. For more information, visit www.havenhospice.org or call 800-727-1889.

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