

POWER TO CONNECT



Have you seen the movie, “My Big Fat Greek Wedding?” Well that was my life, although the title of the film would be Swedish instead of Greek. My mom’s mother, Elsie, came over to America on a boat from Sweden and settled in Chicago. She later went on to bring her sister, Greta, and brother, Iver, back to the States. As their families grew, everyone including their children and their kids migrated to the same northwest suburb. This was extraordinary for me because I grew up having access to a sizeable resource network of aunts, uncles, cousins, and other extended family and friends all within a few blocks.

Having this resource was vital after my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. At 24, I found myself tossed into the caregiver role. Thankfully, my family was in the same town. Many of the women were at-home moms and extracurricular activities for kids were not as robust as they are now. It was easy for my family and friends to pitch in and offer support on any given day. In today’s world, a lot has changed for family life. Long-distant relationships have become the norm for most Americans. The likelihood of having adult children and extended family living in the same neighborhood, yet alone the same state, is pretty rare. And, even when families live within a short distance of each other, work demands and home life are moving at a much faster pace.

Years later when my dad had a stroke, all of my extended family, as well as my only sibling, lived out of town or out of state. The few distant cousins who lived nearby all worked and juggled an array of after-school activities for their kids. Even the aunts and uncles that were still alive were much

EXPANDING YOUR NETWORK

By Kristine Cichowski



older and had ailments of their own. In a few short years, my large support network diminished dramatically.

I came from a family of blue-collar Swedes so throughout my entire life I was connected to tradesmen and other professionals. I always knew who to call if I needed a plumber, an electrician, an attorney, or other service providers. When my dad’s health changed, I needed to translate that same type of thinking into who, where, and what to connect with as it related to caregiving. I had to develop a new skill in how to ask for help for Dad and for me.

My dad, like many adults, worked hard his whole life and was proud of being independent and not having to rely on anyone for anything. It wasn’t part of his personality to think of asking for help. Admitting that he now relied on me or anyone else in day to day activity wasn’t easy for him. Yet, he needed help and so did I. Quite honestly, if the shoe was on the other foot, I’d feel the same way. When caregiving became really challenging—and yes, there were plenty of those times—I would pause and reflect. How would I feel if this were me? How would I want to be treated? Stepping back to see things from my dad’s point of view helped me gain greater empathy, be more respectful in my communications, and more aware of how my attitude and behavior made an impact on reducing his stress and how it could help me find help.

Dad was not one to complain and certainly was not the type to have a pity party when things got tough. He taught me to tackle life challenges head on and not let them get the best of me. If the table was turned and it was Dad

caring for me, I knew he'd rally to do the best he could, regardless of the circumstance. Seeing life in reversed roles motivated me. It helped me realize that I could hurdle or take in stride most obstacles instead of feeling stuck with nowhere to turn. I wanted to be an advocate for Dad and I knew that connecting with others would strengthen and help both of us succeed.

Like most people, I didn't want to impose on others and neither did Dad, but trying to do it all on my own would clearly impact my own health. I couldn't afford to jeopardize that. I found it was really important to pay attention to my emotions and style of communication. I taught myself not to be offended when someone couldn't pitch in or didn't think to offer help. Not being available to help did not automatically equate to not caring or not being concerned. Everyone has something on their plate these days with pressures that aren't always obvious. I learned to be unconditional in my requests for help. If someone could help it was great, and if not, I'd go to Plan B. I soon began to see how anyone who crossed our path on a regular basis could be part of our support network. I just needed a plan.

I began to map a weekly schedule, first identifying all of the structured activities that needed to take place. I placed doctor and therapy visits, meals, and personal care activities all on his weekly schedule and even included down times for naps on busy days. Once this was all laid out on a calendar, it became much easier to see when and what help was needed and more importantly when empty blocks of time occurred.

I then began to explore what Dad liked to do for fun. Whether or not he could or could not do an activity didn't matter. I just wanted to find things he was interested in to spark ideas for outings, activities, and ways to get other people on board with our caregiving journey. For example, Dad loved golf and the Cubs. I placed the ballgames on his schedule so he had something to look forward to and also had something to talk about when my brother from downstate would make his routine calls. Soon there was plenty to talk about other than his daily care and last doctor's visit.

I did the same with the golf tournaments, but took things a step further by inviting Dad's former golf buddy over to putt golf balls in the living room and watch one of the tournaments. That simple act of reaching out created a whole new set of opportunities for Dad. His buddy had heard that Dad had a stroke and hesitated to call because he didn't know what to say or do. But this gave him the chance to interact with Dad on a familiar topic and soon he was inviting Dad to go out for breakfast with old friends. Recreation activities not only became a way to ask for help, but also enabled others who wanted to give support with a way to do that. All that was needed was for me to be a facilitator and to initiate a simple phone call.

There was another time when I asked a friend if it was ok for Dad to visit and watch him install a wood floor. My dad was a carpenter by trade and I thought he would enjoy seeing the project. This was my friend's first time to lay a new floor and it was old hat for my dad. My friend was actually happy to have Dad visit and have access to his expertise. He set Dad up in a comfy chair to supervise. They both enjoyed some great laughs and Dad came home with stories to share. He said it felt good to still be of help. This all was a good

reminder of how important it was to not only keep Dad active, but show him that he still had a purpose in life.

I found that incorporating leisure activities as part of Dad's caregiving schedule actually helped me become more comfortable in asking for help and connect with others in meaningful ways. Our resource network expanded. My initial intent was to put order to my chaotic life and find some respite. As it turned out, Dad's caregiving schedule ended up helping all of us nurture relationships, make new friends, and create new stories. It gave us a lot to look forward to and turned my caregiving world to the positive.

Regardless if you grew up in the same hometown or lived in a variety of places, most people accumulate some sort of resource network in the course of their lives. So-and-so's brother can connect me to a reliable handyman. My neighbor can give me a ride to the train in a pinch. And so on and so on. We tend to not think too much about our resource network when life is rolling along just fine. It's easy to forget that ties with friends and family don't just happen and more importantly that our connections to each other and the community shift as we age. Families grow. People move. Jobs and social activities change. Your network and its strength are impacted by the ebb and flow of life. This really becomes evident as we all begin to face our own mortality. Paying attention and taking time to develop relationships throughout your life with various types of people is a key component in building a strong resource network. Think of this as establishing your own communities of support. Regardless of where you are in your caregiving journey, it's never too late to make new connections. Do it and enjoy the experience.

In her former role as Founding Director of the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago LIFE Center, Kristine Cichowski developed an award-winning education center for families and people faced with physical disabilities and chronic illness. Kristine currently provides education and training to businesses, schools, and community groups on family caregiving, disability inclusion, self-advocacy, and leadership through her company Power To Be. To learn more, visit www.powertobe.net.



Unconditional Love

Seeing me
For who I am
Hearing me
Even when I am angry
Knowing me
For what I value
Understanding me
So I feel safe to share what's on my mind
Loving me
Without expectation
Showing me
How to laugh at myself
Helping me
Achieve my life purpose
Family

~ Kristine Cichowski