

**TELL ME SOMETHIN' GOOD!**  
**... ABOUT SERVING OTHERS**

In the July edition of *Everyday Leadership*, readers were asked to share their story about serving others. Below is an article we'd like to share (with permission of the author):

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**The Angels Wore White Sneakers**  
By L.E. Walsh



Mom followed me into the office. She barely noticed the surroundings, but managed a smile when the almost familiar face on the other side of the desk greeted her and smiled. Mom didn't seem confused. That was erased too. Alzheimer's Disease had already stolen most of her mind. In the weeks, months and years to follow, it also opened two minds in previously unexplored parts.

Her acclimation to a nursing home went simply. "The doctor said you need to be here for treatment" was all I had to tell her. Mom seemed to understand the authority involved. But getting used to the new environment was a bumpier ride for me. My experiences with nursing homes had been very limited and unequivocally unpleasant. I expected the worst.

Mom's roommate was an older woman named Sadie (name changed for privacy purposes). She had the bed next to the window, in seniority I guess, and spent every waking moment staring toward the sky and what little she could see of the garden area outside. She never spoke, smiled or even acknowledged anyone else existed.

The nursing staff turned out to be peppered with old friends, both of mine and Mom's. Many of us had been classmates or familiar faces around our small hometown. All of the staff members I encountered knew their stuff, but more importantly, knew what was involved in their work. Their patients were special.

I observed the nurses and aides closely every time I visited. What they did, they did out of the purest of human emotions. Their love for their patients came out in every action, and spoken word. But one thing confused me. Gone were the "government issue," clunky white shoes I had seen nurses wearing years before when I had been hospitalized as a teenager. The new generation of nurses wore white sneakers. I quickly learned why.

Not a visit went by without something happening or someone needing help that triggered quick response from the nursing staff. People moved with sprinter-like speed when the situation dictated. But always they moved without panic. Calmly, professionally, the staff treated the need and soon returned to routine. With Alzheimer's patients, calm is good.

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Every day, I visited with Mom, her roommate and the attending staff. Each time I came into Mom's room, I greeted her and Sadie with a smile, wave and an upbeat "Good morning!" Mom would smile and sometimes wave back. Within a couple of weeks, I noticed that Sadie began to "see" me. Then one day she raised her frail arm and shook it in her version of a wave. Wow! What a feeling! Right then and there, I committed to make her my project, to bring her out of her shell in whatever way possible, and to reestablish contact for her with the real world.

For two more years, Sadie, Mom and I had conversations, smiles and plenty of waves back and forth. Mom seemed to slip more and more into the abyss of Alzheimer's while Sadie seemed to climb farther out of it. She even started talking to me, though it was difficult to understand her. She hadn't talked to the staff in years.

In time, Sadie died. I wept for her. Or maybe for myself. I missed her and that frail and feeble wave. I missed her almost toothless smile. But I knew she was in a better place and that she had earned her eternal stripes the hard way. Then, as suddenly as she was gone, another patient came to take her place. And then another.

In the five years of almost daily visits to Mom's side, I became a late-in-life friend to many patients. Like Sadie, each seemed to enjoy finding friendship in a purported friendless place. Each had particular traits, foibles and needs. As much as possible, I tried to fill at least one of those needs and to make the day go just a little bit better, if for only one second. A smile was all I needed to know fulfillment. One two-line conversation was enough to see a glimmer of hope and sometimes, joy, in a patient's eyes. Truly the little moments in life make all the difference.

Mom slipped farther and farther away from now. She grew dependent on me or a staff person for all her needs, even eating. It was one part of her letting go and allowing others to "do" for her. Before Alzheimer's struck, that would have been impossible. She was always a giver. For me, it was a role reversal staged in my infancy. Hard as it was to get used to, I began to enjoy the gift of kindness Mom gave me, by letting me feed her.

After Mom passed away, I continued to visit the nursing home. Gradually, I weaned myself from those trips, making a new life for myself out of what I had gained there. I met lots of people in that place. Many of the staff, patients and family members who regularly visited became my friends. Today many patients have passed on. Some staff have moved away. But some I still see today. It's just harder to recognize them if they're not wearing white sneakers.

Another thing I've learned is that white sneakers make a pretty good shoe of choice.