

Treating seniors as equals, on their terms

My friend's grandmother worried about the blotches and bumps on her skin. The dermatologist looked her over then gave his diagnosis: "Ma'am," he said "The truth is, you've outlived your skin."

At 98, she had.

Seniors outlive a lot of things, says Sheila Collins, director and co-owner of Caring Strategies, a company that helps families solve elder-care problems, like deciding if Mom should stay in the home she's lived in for 50 years; like what to do when she falls and the memory lapses happen every day rather than once in awhile.

The oldest of seven, Collins learned to look out for others, and now she looks out for elders. Family

members don't always agree about what's best for their aging parents, or the ones who live out of town don't agree with those who live in town and are doing the "heavy lifting."

Collins' own father, in upstate New York, is 90, has dementia and Parkinson's, and is cared for by her mother and her brother. Like half of her clients, Collins knows what it's like to be the "somewhere else" child.

Recently, she's begun to Skype with clients so they can see and talk with their adult children who live far away.

With graduate degrees in behavioral science and spiritual studies, Collins is also a qualified dementia care spe-

cialist. Even with all of her education and experience, it is still a challenge to work with the elderly. She must slow down, be "in the moment," get off her to-do list and really listen. One 86-year-old told her they would do just fine as long as Collins treated her as an equal.

That was good advice. Nobody likes to be talked down to or "managed." "You can't push your own agenda," Collins says, "not with the client or with her family." Collins may have strong opinions about what should be done, but the family has to decide. "I can be neutral," she says, "a third-party professional."

Still, her third-party stance can be interrupted when the phone rings at 3 a.m. and a call center tells her that one of her clients has fallen. The alarm on the

emergency call "necklace" her client wears has gone off, meaning someone is down, scared and maybe even unconscious. Collins, along with her staff members Jeanie Tauss, a geriatric care manger, and Janice Duncan, a certified nursing assistant, are always on alert.

About half of their clients still live at home, so the team arranges for bathing, dressing, meals and medicines. It can be hard to remember if you've had the blue pill or the white one, so clients use the automated pill dispenser that beeps to remind clients it's time to take the pill, then ejects the right one.

Living, as we know, gets harder. But try telling that to proud, independent former engineers or scientists or women who've run homes and busy offices at the same time.

"It's hard for them to accept help," Collins says. "Like most of us, they have this idea that they are still self-reliant."

But most are not. On the day I met with Collins, she had taken a client to the dentist, driven her back to her assisted living facility and left a big yellow post-it note on the seat of her walker, stating the time she would pick her up for her next appointment.

The letters were large and clear and signified, "I will be here for you."

And that is the essence of Caring Strategies. It's a business, and they charge a fee for the clients they serve, but it is also like a neighbor, looking out from her front porch to see if things are all right; it's a support group, shoring up clients and families when things are stress-

ful, and it's a taxi service, the kind where the driver knows your name, your address, even what you are allergic to.

Collins has learned this: We all need a plan. Even those who don't have many resources can have a will, a health care directive, and a designated power of attorney. Even though the fastest growing sector of the population is 85 or older, we deny our own aging.

But it's coming. Caring Strategies can't stop that, but they can offer respect, peace of mind and a big note posted somewhere that promises, "I'm coming."

Caring Strategies can be reached at 256-489-7573 or caringstrategies.com.

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