

It Became Personal

The best part of my job is to visit in our centers, where I get to meet our residents and witness the remarkable skill and compassion of our associates as they interact with their customers. I always come away blessed by what I see and hear.

The experience is even more poignant, however, when the person being served is one's own family member or close friend. Two such occasions occurred for Lola and me recently, and both within a week's time.

When Lola and I moved to Cleveland, Tennessee, in 1962, among those who welcomed us, encouraged us and became mentors for us were the Gibson and Neal families. We all went to the same church, and there were civic and community events that also brought us together. They were important to us.

On January 2, James Edward Gibson, 90, died. A sports enthusiast, he was named best athlete at Bradley Central High School when he graduated in 1933, and was inducted into the Bradley County Sports Hall of Fame in 1987. He was retired after more than 46 years with Cleveland Tennessee Enamel Company, a division of Hardwick Stove Company, which was later purchased by Maytag. That's where Lola worked with him for 23 years. Mr. Gibson had been a resident of Life Care Center of Cleveland for about two weeks. Upon visiting with the family, his son, Steve, clicked off the names of the staff members of that facility who had cared for his father and showed their love and concern in many ways. He was grateful for all they did to make his dad's final days on earth as pleasant and as comfortable as possible.

Four days later, on January 6, Ernest Neal, also 90, passed away. A veteran of the U.S. Army, he had been a teacher, school principal and businessman, retiring as an agent for Jefferson-Pilot Insurance Company. He was a former president of the Cleveland/Bradley Chamber of Commerce and the Cleveland Kiwanis Club, an organization which he also served as lieutenant governor of the Kentucky/Tennessee district. The club awarded him the Kiwanis International Legion of Honor for 50 years of service to the organization, and he was among the select few to receive the Kiwanis International 50 years of perfect attendance award. He had been a resident at Life Care Center of Cleveland for nearly three years.

When Mr. Neal expired, the assistant director of nursing, Susan Lewis, immediately called me, and I rushed to the center. I found his wife, Mona, sitting on his bed, holding his hand. His son, Robert, was in the room. Esmerelda Lee, the acting executive director, pulled a curtain across a portion of the wing on

(more)

which his room was located to give the family some privacy amidst the grief. One by one, perhaps a dozen in all, staff members came into the room to hug Mona and to tell her they loved her and they enjoyed serving Mr. Neal.

On Sunday, January 8, the day of his funeral, his daughter, Elizabeth, who had flown in from Iowa, said she was “doing okay” as friends came by to share condolences, until two certified nursing assistants approached the open coffin with tears streaming down their cheeks. “That’s when I lost it, to see how much they loved my father,” Elizabeth said.

The actions of our associates in these two instances of the deaths of close friends tugged at my heartstrings, too. A new wave of pride in the associates with whom I am privileged to work swept over me. I felt first-hand the meaning of the phrase I hear repeated often in our centers all across the country – to work in a nursing center is more than a job; it is a ministry.

These staff members at Life Care Center of Cleveland ministered to the Gibsons and the Neals. And they ministered to me.

--Beecher Hunter