

Nora's Corner

Commentary by Nora Gibson, ElderHealth Northwest Executive Director

December, 2004

I Can't Tell You How Much I Love Living ... Where?

I recently married a wonderful man whose mother lives in a nursing home on Staten Island, New York. This “home” is a 596 bed facility (not unusual on the East Coast) that has a good reputation. In fact, my new mother-in-law has done very well since adjusting to moving there. She has gained weight and connected socially with other alert women who watch out for each other and enjoy spending time together.

Despite the “good care,” the home she lives in is still a very foreign environment. With close to 600 very frail people living there, a person visiting is overwhelmed by the profound levels of physical and cognitive disability. To quote Dr. Bill Thomas, this is truly an “old age archipelago,” or as a friend of mine put it, a “frail ghetto.” </

I stood in the lobby and watched nurse aides rushing people in wheelchairs into a large activity room. I was surprised to watch a Catholic sister using a bar code scanner on the backs of the wheelchairs as people were wheeled into the room. This home serves a neighborhood of largely Italian and Irish families, so many of them held rosaries in their hands to pray the rosary together. You could hear the tones of a male voice saying prayers but it was pre-recorded. There was no human being leading this activity. It was surreal for me but clearly normal there.

Many of the people who live there were not thriving as my mother-in-law is. The most physically frail and those with dementia were entirely disengaged from any kind of human interaction.

I observed one woman who was quite agitated try to leave the day room, dragging her wheelchair behind her. She just wanted to sit by the nurse's station. The staff intercepted her mission by sitting her back in the wheelchair and -locking the brakes. At that point she again struggled to her feet, dragging the wheel chair—locked brakes and all—behind her. As I tried to intervene and distract her by inviting her to join us at another table, she grabbed my hands and squeezed them tight and said, “I can't tell you how much I hate it here.” I could understand why.

The next morning after flying back from New York, I was planning to spend the day at Buchanan Place, our new 12-person residence in the Columbia City neighborhood of Seattle. I walked through the door and could smell pancakes and bacon. A staff member was cooking breakfast and several residents were sitting at the dining room table eating and chatting together. Five of the residents had previously lived in nursing homes. All the residents are frail, and most have dementia.

I sat down at the table with three of the woman living there and one of them reached across the table, took my hands and said, “I can't tell you how much I love living here.” She has memory loss and doesn't know who I am. It was a spontaneous and in-the-moment response. She knew she wasn't in her own home but she expressed pleasure with where she was living. It was very moving for me to see her face and feel her warmth toward the home. Buchanan Place feels familiar, not foreign, and its small scale and neighborhood location make it even more comfortable. I hope this model is part of our country's future and that 596 bed institutions for our elders will become a relic of the past.