

A Convalescent Home with a Heart
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Frequently I write about my sister Kathy, a special adult with epilepsy, severe hearing loss and now diminished capability because of a recent fall that left her with a brain injury.

Hopefully, the personal information I share is helpful to others who might be struggling with overseeing the care of a special adult, or at least add some comfort to what can be a staggering task.

Kathy was recently living with a young family certified through California Mentor. She had a few bad falls one day, and during a seizure, hit her head so hard, she sustained a mild brain hemorrhage.

During the course of a few months, Kathy ended up in the intensive care unit, then critical care, a stay at Los Palos Convalescent Hospital, back to the Little Co. of Mary, home to our sister's house, then back to Los Palos for an indefinite stay.

The convalescent home is a place that holds no happy memories for me.

My mom died at Los Palos nine years ago. Originally, she had been transferred from a Los Angeles hospital to a rehab facility in San Pedro nicknamed "Pavilions," where it turned out, her insurance would only pay for a week's stay.

After exactly seven days of no improvement, the staff realized she was dying. They called me to come pick her up, then imperviously wheeled her out to the curb and stood by as I struggled to put her limp body in my car by myself. That facility never quite sat right with me after that.

I was still under the impression Mom had more time, but her tired, emphysemic lungs couldn't take any more treatment.

Thankfully, near-by Los Palos took her in and made her comfortable. Two days later, she died in my arms as we said the Lord's Prayer together.

Los Palos is a place where the un-monied go for Alzheimer's, brain injuries, strokes, dementia, advanced diabetes care or simply for folks who outlive other family or health pensions.

Kathy, who depends on my sister and I and our spouses and Medical for all her basic needs, has few material possessions. She could easily be a street person if something were to happen to Sandy or myself because there is no one else in our aging family able to take in all her health issues.

We have relied on the goodness and generosity of doctors and dentists to keep my sister healthy, although wherever Kathy goes, she's always seems to be the "most complicated" case.

But what I wanted to say, was although Kathy landed in a low cost, no-frills nursing home with stroke victims and other ailments all around her, she is being taken care of by the most amazing staff.

When you walk in the door, you might smell the struggle of keeping folks clean and dry, but the place shines.

I've never witnessed the kind of love and dedication Kathy is given at Los Palos from a health care facility. Every time Kathy wheels out of the room for a bath, therapy or activity room, she comes back to a freshly made bed. She is always clean, even when she has to use the bed pan or john about eight times per night.

Her nurses, Angie, Dominique, Ana and a multitude of other caretakers and aids are always a beep away with a smile and a gentle word -- no matter how many times they have to change bed linens, raise and lower Kathy's bed, or help clean up spills.

And they treat everyone the same way. I came in one day and another nurse was patting and hugging Joe, a tall, once-vibrant man with Alzheimer's who was crying and having a bad day. His wife of 57 years comes in early and spends most of her day with him.

Another time I walked in the door, another staff member was directing Bingo to a less than attentive crowd, patiently helping many to slide the dots on their card. Accidents are cleaned up immediately, and comfortable adult-size bibs are gently placed around necks before meals to save on laundry bills.

Our journey with Kathy isn't over. Currently, Long Beach-based California Mentor and Torrance-based Harbor Regional Center counselor are on hold to help find my sister an upgraded care-taking situation. Their dedication has helped keep my other sister and me sane during the tumultuous task of caring for a precious, but mentally declining sibling.

Unhappily, Kathy, has to wear a helmet and use a walker now wherever she goes, since the next fall can be fatal. She abhors it, but the doctor explained to her: “Kathy! You aren’t a 15-year-old girl trying to impress teenage boys, anymore, so get over it.” She laughed sadly, but somehow that logic made sense to her.

I told her, “Kath, your mission right now is to cheer everyone up in here.” She’s taken the task to hand, making friends and offering a cheery attitude to everyone around her.

But I’m especially thankful to the staff a Los Palos. They give me hope that there is still genuine compassion in the world, especially among those working with the poor or forgotten souls living in low-cost convalescent homes.