



X. H. A.

Watercolor Mother painted

# Photo Album

by Ellen A Brown

Missing Ingredients

A Thoughtful Look at Elder Care Institutions  
and Some Ideas About How We All Can Help  
Make Them More Like "Home"

by Ellen A. Brown

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## Introduction

Buncombe and Henderson Counties are attracting retirees at a spectacular rate, and the adult care /nursing/ assisted living home industry is expanding rapidly, too. Nationally and locally, the demographics for the coming decades indicate a steady increase in the percentage of our population falling into the over 65 age bracket, and the health care industry is adjusting accordingly.

Unfortunately, so many new facilities are being built each year that the existing labor pool has been stretched beyond its capacity. There is a critical shortage of nursing aides, and the prospects for finding solutions to this labor shortage are discouraging. Many existing facilities may lose out in the cut-throat competition to attract and retain employees, and the residents of all these facilities will be at risk.

There are not any easy solutions to these problems, but our best hope may well rest with the general public. If enough consumers start visiting these places, changes and improvements would begin. It seems reasonable to predict that consumers will demand good services from the industry. Those facilities which survive are likely to be the ones which provide really good care - with good staff morale and all the comforts of home. This needn't apply exclusively to those homes which are for the wealthy, either. There is no reason why volunteers cannot be recruited and put to good use in all facilities, whether private pay or those which accept government reimbursements.

The homes which are thriving are the ones which have the most stability (low turn-over rate for administrators and staff,) good support from family and friends, and an on-going commitment to a healthful, home-like environment. The institutions which are most at risk are easy to spot - staff morale is low, residents are getting inconsistent care, and too much energy is being expended on meeting minimum requirements and passing the next inspection.



With all the facilities competing to survive, most of them will be running under capacity and will find it necessary to make cuts in the budget - in food, in staff positions, in maintenance, and so on. There are too many facilities and too few inspectors to monitor them all.

After visiting homes in Buncombe and Henderson Counties for over one year, I have developed some ideas about what volunteers could do to help improve the conditions in our area's homes. I will start by telling my story, giving examples from my own personal experience offering my time and talents as a volunteer. I'll explain what prompted me to get involved initially and also what my own selfish interests are. I hope that everyone who reads this book will realize that it is in his/her best interest to get involved. No matter how hard we try to deny it, we cannot avoid aging, and there's no guarantee that we will never have to give up our independence and move into an institution. We all, therefore, have a vested interest in the elder care available in "our hometown."



*Beverly Health Care*

### Special Thanks

My daughter, Kate Brown, deserves my thanks and praise. She has expressed an interest and an appreciation in my visits to the elderly and has made me feel that I have been doing something worthwhile. It was a pleasure to invite her to use her skills with a camera, and her black and white photos of Ethel turned out very well.

Sara Cohen also deserves some recognition for her enthusiastic work as an activities director. She got me started and made me feel welcome at Beverly Health Care.

Some people say that volunteering is a thankless job, but I don't think so. I have been thanked every day in every institution - by smiles from the residents, greetings from staff and by the special friends who have welcomed me into their lives.

And, even though I haven't launched Pelican Projects yet - for I haven't found anyone to work with me to get it organized - there are many individuals who have offered their encouragement. Perhaps I just need to complete this book and wait to see what happens next ....



Kate and Ethel



## Part One

### My Story - Mother's Story

Sooner or later, most of us will start looking ahead and planning for the changes which inevitably will occur in our lives. I didn't start such planning until I was in my mid to late thirties. I began to feel a responsibility to help my mother plan for her old age. I began talking with my brothers, thinking that we might benefit from sharing our different perspectives.

Our father had died in 1971, leaving Mother a widow at age 53, and the three of us - John-27, Tom-24 and me-21. Mother never remarried, so each of her children tried to look out for her in our different ways.

Mother sold the family home in 1980 and moved to a condo (a town house.) John owned a house near-by and could check up on her from time to time. I lived in Virginia and Tom lived in New York.

Mother had a comfortable situation - finding new friends among her neighbors and having remained active in her book club, garden club and church circle. She had a modestly sized flower garden which she thoroughly enjoyed, and she became a member of the condo's board - helping to plan social events and to welcome newcomers.

By the mid-eighties, however, Mother began having troubles with her ankles and her back, often having fractures which laid her up for weeks and months at a time. These problems were all related to osteoporosis, a condition of having brittle and fragile bones due to calcium depletion.

Whenever she had another injury she became housebound and isolated. Many of her oldest and dearest friends were becoming less active, too, and Mother was reluctant to ask anyone for help. I began to notice that these health problems were taking a toll on her morale. She often answered the phone with an angry, irritated voice, and then would change her tone when she realized I was calling. Her isolation and her anxiety about her health began to trouble me, and that is what prompted me to start thinking and planning.

There were many nice retirement centers being built in the Charlotte area, and Mother had friends who were getting



on the waiting list at their favorite facility. I encouraged her to talk to her friends and find out about these new places, and we often talked about Sharon Towers, an older retirement center sponsored by the Presbyterian Church.

I visited a retirement center in Virginia (Westminster Canterbury in Lynchburg) and talked to the director about my mother's choices. He gave me some very good advice. He explained that if someone moves to a new home or facility, the transition is always smoother if he (or she) has made the decision himself. If his children decide for him, the parent is much more likely to be unhappy there. The director also recommended a book for me to read (*You and Your Aging Parent*, by Silverstone & Hyman) and said that it would have advice about many of the other questions which arise for families facing this sort of transition.

We all had conversations with Mother about this big decision. She was reluctant to give up her condo, and for many legitimate reasons, too. She loved entertaining and wanted to always offer us a place to stay. She really enjoyed gardening and having her own back-yard patio. She hated to move to a smaller place, for that would mean giving up most of her silver & china, her linens, her antiques, and a lifetime's accumulation of memorabilia (photographs, scrapbooks and old letters.)

Mother's church, Covenant Presbyterian, happened to have made a new addition to the staff that year. They had hired a retired nurse to be a parish nurse, a new concept which was catching on in many churches. The new nurse made an appointment to go by and see Mother. Covenant is a very large church and Mother (even though she was a deacon) had not had an official visit from any of the staff before.

It only took a few minutes for the nurse to size up the situation, and she was soon giving Mother a "prescription" saying, "Kitty, you should move to Sharon Towers. You will love it there! You know half of the residents there already, and if anything ever happens to your back or you have another fracture, there will be people all around to help." Mother couldn't imagine offering any objections after that. The combined authority of the church and the medical profession were all the persuasion she needed.

Looking back now, with the benefit of hindsight, I can see that mother moved at the perfect time. She was still energetic and outgoing and made many friends there before her health declined.

## Sharon Towers

Once Mother had settled in at Sharon Towers, she was able to participate fully in the social activities and responsibilities there. She took art classes and entertained her friends from outside (her circle, bridge club and book club.) She took on the job of finding volunteers to sit at the Azalea West entrance, and she continued to drive herself to church and to her favorite stores. Her apartment was beautifully appointed - with custom made draperies and some of her best antiques.

One of the challenges of a new place was figuring out the social structures and the politics. I didn't pay much attention to it at the time, but I remember Mother telling us about how angry she was about an incident that had occurred. Apparently Mother had made a generous gesture of loaning a fine gilded mirror to hang in one of the hallways. This was a family treasure which Mother had always kept over our living room mantel. What Mother didn't know was that there were several individuals who had become a self-appointed committee to approve (or disapprove) of any art to be displayed on that floor.

One of Mother's new neighbors let it be known that it would be out of the question to hang such a mirror on that hall - since anyone could see that it needed to be repaired! The glass had lost some of its silver coating and could no longer give a perfect reflection. Mother took back her mirror, drove to her favorite framing shop, and had them install a new mirror. She never forgot this disagreeable incident and never did offer to hang it at Sharon Towers again. My brother John has it in his living room.

One of the nicest things about Sharon Towers is the opportunity it affords for people to meet new people and to try new things. It was possible for Mother to make a smooth transition there since she still maintained contacts with church friends and stayed active in some of her favorite organizations. One of the reasons why Mother felt at home there, too, was the fact that so many other residents had come from similar social backgrounds. Even though Mother gradually lost contact with some of her old friends, she found other really "nice" people with whom she felt comfortable socially.

Many residents participated in art classes, and a number of them were professional artists themselves. Mother took up therum painting, a technique of painting on velvet.



Mother's  
condo patio



Mother's room  
at Sharon Towers -  
Assisted Living

Chickadee Mother  
Painted







X. H. A.

Watercolor Mother painted



I'll always treasure the little chickadee she gave me. She tried watercolor, too, and one Christmas she sent me a hand-painted snowy scene which impressed me as being good enough to frame. She had many undeveloped talents. Too bad she didn't discover them earlier!



at mother's  
75<sup>th</sup>  
Birthday  
Party



At a  
summer  
luau

## Forgetful and Confused

I never did hear a doctor comment on Mother's mental health, and my brothers and I didn't express much concern to each other, but something wasn't quite right. We used to fret about how hard it was to discuss things with her, especially anything which had to do with finances or business matters. She had always tended to be a bit irrational and emotional, qualities which were in disfavor in our family household for as long as I can remember. So, as she got more forgetful and confused, we didn't think that her behavior was changed, just intensified.

She seemed to have a short attention span, and it began to bother me that she would ask me a question and then ask a second question before I had opened my mouth to answer the first. I got very impatient with her sometimes because she didn't seem to understand things which seemed obvious to me, and we often had repeat conversations (same questions from her, same responses from me.) I suppose I knew that she couldn't help it, but I was frustrated nevertheless.

We got the idea of celebrating her seventy-fifth birthday by having a big party at a club downtown. We sent letters around to every childhood friend and relative we could find and asked them to start planning a trip to Charlotte and to send me anecdotes and photos so that I could make her a big scrap book. We got wonderful responses from nearly everyone on our list, and the party was a wonderful success.

Mother was rather bewildered about the arrangements. She kept saying that we shouldn't go to so much trouble. When one of her closest friends from childhood wrote and said she'd love to stay with Mother, she didn't seem happy to hear the news. She must have found it stressful to be welcoming all these familiar people from out of town and to have absolutely no control about where they would be staying. She couldn't even plan to serve them breakfast before they left town!

I believe her birthday party marked a turning point in her health, her energy and her ability to grasp things mentally. We had a grand celebration for her and she enjoyed her scrapbook for hours on end in the months which followed. It's a good thing we didn't wait for her eightieth to make a big fuss over her.



## Declining Health

It is hard to reconstruct what happened as her health declined. She was put in the infirmary several times for back and joint problems, and she eventually had to give up her large room on the first floor and take up residence on an assisted living floor. We helped her get settled in there and she seemed pleased, but her confidence was shaken and she was timid about how well she could manage.

In the winter of 1997 she had a problem which required major surgery, and once I arrived to keep her company at the hospital I could see that she was in a panic about what was going on. I tried to distract her by teasing her and making up tall tales about what might happen next. She trusted me enough to smile and acknowledge that I was being silly. I even resorted to singing (fortunately, she had a private room) and tried to remember hymns which she would recognize.

I understood what she was saying to me. She wanted to give up. She didn't think she could find the strength or energy to go back to Sharon Towers after the surgery and try, once more, to be active again and participate in her old activities. She was tired and discouraged in every way - mentally, physically and spiritually.

She went back, though, and lived on the assisted living hall. She may have fooled the staff into thinking she was more capable than she really was. She could get herself out to the little dining room and make pleasant conversation with the other residents, but she would often leave most of her food untouched. She could pick up her fork, she could discuss the menu, she could talk about the weather and the upcoming activity, and if asked, she could explain that she didn't care for any meatloaf, but couldn't remember to eat anything.

Looking back now I can see that Mother probably needed a greater level of care than she was getting, but I didn't ask the right questions or persist in making adequate observations myself. Phone calls were the only means of frequent contact with her, and our conversations became increasingly frustrating. By the summer of 1997 there were many indications that she was confused. In every phone conversation I had to explain to her not to worry about planning her niece's wedding.

My cousin Kitty was engaged to be married in December of 1997. Kitty had grown children and one granddaughter, so she and her fiance, also a grandparent, were not counting on Aunt Katharine to help with any of the wedding arrangements. The wedding was to be in Greensboro, and since Mother lived in Charlotte, I lived in Hendersonville - all we were expected to do was to make hotel reservations and to attend the ceremony. Mother could not get it out of her head, however, that Kitty was expecting her to help - with invitations, making reservations, and more.

For the aides working on Mother's floor, this wedding was all they heard about. They were happy to encourage Mother to tell them all about the plans, but they must have suspected that they weren't getting all the facts. Mother was pretty upset, in July, that she still had no idea what she would be wearing for the big event, in December!

Each time I had conversations with the aides I felt a rush of different emotions. I felt grateful to these women for their warmth and cheerfulness, and I felt proud of Mother for her plucky attitude. I also felt guilty that I wasn't there more often to observe how well she interacted with everyone. Many of the residents on her hall were able to function well physically, but were living in their own imaginary world and couldn't carry on meaningful conversations, or make new friends. I began to realize that Mother was becoming isolated from her friends at Sharon Towers, and that she was unable to initiate contact with them.

Mother was close to tears one day when I asked her, over the phone, to look on her address book and see if she could find my telephone number and address. After patiently coaching her through several easy steps - "Did you look on your bedside table? Is it on the table by the window? No, that sounds like your old address book - the new one is smaller than that. Remember, I wrote the addresses there for all of the people you might need to call... Yes, that's the one. Can you find my name in the front? Yes, that's it. I wrote down my home number. Yes, you must dial a 1, then the area code - 704 ... and then my seven digit number. If you have trouble dialing the number, just ask one of the nurses to dial it for you. They will be glad to help."



## Becoming Like a Little Child

During the Autumn of 1997, John and I had many conversations about Mother's confusion and her lack of energy. John went by to see her nearly every day, and he began to find some humor in the conversations they had. He began to accept the fact that no arguments or explanations would succeed in helping Mother "tune in" to his channel. We began to realize that Mother was really not functioning like an adult, but rather, more like a young child.

It helped me to start thinking about Mother as if she were a child. I realized that the kindest thing we could do for her would be to give her permission to enjoy life as a child, with no more worries or responsibilities. I remember trying to explain to John one night on the phone that we should probably change our expectations so that we wouldn't be so disappointed.

I remembered how important it was as a parent of young children, to have reasonable, age appropriate expectations. One shouldn't expect a toddler to understand how to cross the street safely, and it would not be reasonable to punish a toddler for picking a pretty tulip from the garden. Similarly, we probably shouldn't be angry at Mother for her efforts to plan our cousin's wedding or for her inability to dial a phone number. I knew that John was feeling less frustrated and more at peace about our Mom's limitations when I noticed a little bud vase with a rose in her room one day. Mother could not stop admiring it, and kept telling me that John had brought it from his yard. She always did respond to beauty and thoughtfulness.

## A Fall and a Trip to the Hospital

Mother's concern about what to wear to Kitty's wedding finally prompted me, in late October, to go pay her a surprise visit and take her out shopping for something new. When I got to her floor the aides told me that she was at the Carolinas Medical Center, that she had had a fall in the doctor's office the day before. I realized that John might have tried to call me but that I had not checked my phone messages from the night before. I hurried over to the hospital, thinking that, whatever had happened, Mother might not be able to go to the wedding after all.

Mother was frightened and totally disoriented. She had pains in her hands and shoulders which added to her general hysteria and fear. They had taken X-rays and were planning a CAT-scan, but they had not been able to find any evidence

that she had broken anything when she fell. She didn't understand how to operate the call button, and she had difficulty holding a cup or a fork. I realized I would have to be there to feed her for a few days.

My brother Tom decided to come down from New York to see for himself how she was doing. He must have been shocked to see how helpless she had become. She recognized the three of us, but she couldn't figure out why we were in this train station, with all these strangers. Sometimes she changed her mind and decided she must be in a college, and she liked all the nice young students who came in and out of her room.

The three of us went out to dinner that night and compared our impressions of what was happening. I remember thinking at the time that Tom had more confidence than I did about there being a medical solution to Mother's problems. He may have been very discouraged by her condition but not quite ready to admit it to himself or to his siblings.

I began to think that Mother did not need any more medical procedures or any further poking and probing from technicians. What she really needed was to be taken somewhere peaceful and quiet, someplace like home. I began to think about bringing her to live with me - in Hendersonville. I was unemployed at the time and trying to develop a non-profit organization to serve the unmet needs of the elderly. It made sense to me that if Mother were there in my home, I could secure in-home help to whatever degree necessary, and that it would do me good to spend time with her. We both could have experienced some wonderful closeness and closure.

I had been working in a related field (at the Council of Aging) so I felt well connected with the resources in my community. I got to thinking about the medical loan closet (where I might be able to borrow a bed and/or a wheelchair) and about the respite care organizations which might provide me with sitting so that I could get out once in awhile.

I talked with Mother's doctor and was pleased with her open-minded reaction. We both recognized that Mother didn't need any more X-rays, I-V's, tests or strangers. She wasn't going to get substantially better. All she really needed and wanted was the comfort and serenity of home. Neither of us, the doctor or me, was unhappy with the care Mother had been getting at Sharon Towers - but we were willing to consider that perhaps there was a better alternative to

"lifetime care" in a retirement home, at least under these circumstances .

I started making phone calls from home. I called the head nurse at Sharon Towers and set up a tentative appointment to do a 4-way telephone conference call with my two brothers. After several conversations with my brother John, we had reached a similar understanding of the issues and the logic of my revolutionary idea. My other brother, however, was taken by surprise by everything I was suggesting, and he simply could not adjust his thinking. He was so accustomed to the assumptions we had always held - that Mother was getting good care, that she would be at Sharon Towers for life, and that the doctors and nurses would know best about how to provide good care. He stated, in a long phone call one Friday evening, that I was not experienced in providing such care.

A difficult conversation turned even darker when he suggested that I was "grasping at straws" to solve my employment crisis. He had always been accustomed to offering his kid sister advice, and I don't think he had adjusted to the reality that I was a big girl now and that I wasn't asking him for career advice. We were both upset and getting nowhere fast. We both hung up feeling angry, and I'm sure he didn't sleep any better than I did that Friday night.

The next morning I woke up about four a.m. and started writing an angry letter to both brothers to tell them all about my feelings - mainly my angry ones. Funny thing was, though, that I found myself relenting toward the sixth or seventh page. I ended the letter saying that I would withdraw my offer to bring Mother to Hendersonville, because I didn't want her to become aware of the disagreement we were having. I didn't want her to think that something was wrong. As one might expect, the tension didn't just disappear between me and my brother Tom. We found we had lots more to say a few months later, after Mother's funeral. Does every family have unresolved sibling stuff like ours?

#### Learning How to Cheer Her Up

I tried to be philosophic about my thwarted plans. I found every opportunity to make trips to Charlotte and to encourage my kids to go, too. I began to pay closer attention to noticing what Mother enjoyed and to making it easier for my kids to relate to her. This was the starting point of Pelican Projects, a notion I had of trying to bring good cheer into places like Sharon Towers. The inspiration



for this idea came in the form of a book by Shel Silverstein, one of the all-time best of the writers of children's poetry. This is how it happened :

I remember going into a bookstore one Friday afternoon in November, intent on locating a copy of a children's book by Bill Peet. The store did not have the book I wanted, but, as always, it had many other good books to tempt me. I spotted one which was new to me, a new book by Shel Silverstein, called *Falling Up*. I bought it on the spot, thinking that I would love to own it, and then thinking I might want to give it to my son, David, for his up-coming fifteenth birthday. It would be the perfect gift for him! I had hoped to think of something which would make him smile, and to remind him to stay a kid at heart.

On the way home, I came to the conclusion that, since I was planning to drive to Charlotte the next day, I could take this book along to show Mother. I might ask her to sign her name in the front. I knew she couldn't remember birthdays anymore, so this would be a gentle way to remind her.

When I got to her room the next afternoon, I was pleased to see how alert and energetic she seemed. She was wearing a new pair of glasses and was pleased to be able to write an inscription in David's book, saying, "To David With Love, Grandmother Kitty." Her handwriting was shaky, and I noticed the great difficulty she had holding the pen. Her hands were gnarled and bony, and I wondered if their appearance troubled her. She had always been a bit vain about her pretty hands.

I turned to a poem near the front of the book which showed a fat little man with a big tummy standing on a scale. He was saying that the scale **must** be telling him to go ahead and eat - pounds and tons more - if only he could **see** the scale. To my surprise, Mother started reading this poem with me, out loud, and then she smiled. She looked really happy. And, she looked over to the next page and started reading another!

As we made our way through the silly poems and the delightful illustrations, I found myself wondering why I had not done this before. There were many other such books at home which might amuse her. After reading ten or twelve poems together, Mother seemed tired. We turned back to the front page and I reminded her that the book was to be a present for David. I asked her if she thought David would enjoy it. She had lapsed back into confusion and didn't



know what I was showing her. She tried to read her own handwriting, but she couldn't.

A few minutes later I went out into the hall to speak with one of the nurses. Two residents were sitting in the hall near Mother's doorway. I had not noticed them particularly when I had arrived, but I remember one of them droning the question, "Can somebody help me?" They must have overheard the poems we had been reading for they both wanted me to read them poems, too. It made me sad to think how starved they must be - for laughter, for attention, and for someone from the outside to talk to.

As I drove back to Hendersonville I kept thinking about books I could bring on my next trip. If I were to give a set of the Shel Silverstein books to the staff on the third floor... Would they put them to good use? Is there a shelf or a table available? Could some of the volunteers be encouraged to read these poems? Are there already volunteers who read books for the visually impaired?

David was pleased with his birthday present. He had always liked and appreciated humorous poetry and clever cartoons (**Far Side**, especially.) On Wednesday, the day before Thanksgiving, Kate, David and I went by to see Mother on our way to the beach. We didn't stay long since we had a long drive ahead of us.

I coached David a bit and encouraged him to go over close to Mother's bed and tell her thank you for the book. I think he got close enough that Mother could really see him and admire him - how tall he had grown, how curly his hair had gotten. She asked him the inevitable questions, "Do you like your school? What are your favorite subjects?" and so on. He answered as politely as possible, probably thinking that he had told her the same answers on his last few visits, but there didn't seem to be anything condescending in his manner.

Mother remembered to play the hostess. She introduced us to each staff person as they came into her room. An activities person came by with some Thanksgiving goodies - little cookies shaped like turkeys and some cups of apple cider. The staff person had obviously been visiting with Mother that day, and she coaxed Mother to tell us what time of year it was and what special holiday. Mother guessed poorly at first, timidly suggesting that it might be July. Something finally registered with her, though, and she proudly performed for us, saying, "Oh yes, I know. Gobble! Gobble! Gobble!"

David was unprepared for his grandmother to start making turkey noises in such a fashion, but he soon realized that all of us , even Mother, were laughing. Mother had provided us with a good ice breaker and an excuse for laughter. Kate and David relaxed considerably after that.

I was always painful for me to notice how stiff and uncomfortable my children could be around my mother. They had spent more time with their other grandparents and had never been awkward around them. Now, with my mother so confused and forgetful, David and Kate were challenged to think of what to say to her and uncertain about how to act. Laughter was a good response - but I felt I had to demonstrate that it was O.K. None of us wanted her to think we were making fun of her.

That was the last time David saw my mother. I'm glad he saw her that day, for she was as cheerful and happy as I had seen her in many months. Despite her confusion and her anxiety about her health, she was hospitable, loving and good-natured. She must have been pleased to get a look at her handsome, well-spoken and highly presentable grandchildren.

One of the words which everyone readily associates with my mother is the word hospitality. She never stopped offering us something to eat and drink on our visits, and she would never let us leave without insisting on putting something in our hands - a dollar bill, a lollipop, or a magazine.

The hospitality story I'll always remember, though, took place in December, a few days before my cousin Kitty's wedding. Mother had stopped asking about what she should wear, so we realized that she had given up hope about going to the service. It was a tremendous delight for her then, when Kitty and David (the groom) showed up in her room two days before the wedding.

Kitty told her all about the church, the dresses, the flower girl, the guests coming all the way from England and everything Mother wanted to hear. When a nurse came in to greet the illustrious visitors, Mother proudly introduced the bride and groom. Then, as if she were entertaining at the Ritz, Mother said, "Bring us all Champagne!"

Christmas of 1997 was the first time we were unable to open our presents together at John's house. We took our gifts over to Sharon Towers and tried our best to celebrate

in her room. I had done her shopping for her, and she could not remember what we had purchased and wrapped on her behalf. She could hardly remember what anyone gave her, either. My kids were in Virginia with their Dad and their other grandparents, and John and I did not manage to get into a very festive mood.

One Saturday morning in January, I got up early and finished making a pillow as a little gift, and I persuaded Kate to go with me for the day. The pillow was easy to put together. I had stitched colorful pansies onto a white background a few months before, and I already had fabric in complementary colors to make a border around the flowers. Pillows were a good present for someone who is bed-bound and who can no longer read or enjoy hobbies. Pillows were practical and pretty to look at.

Kate and I had a poignant and memorable visit with Mother that day,. I was pleased to notice how easily Kate adjusted to the fantasy world that Mother lived in. Kate adores young children, and she seems to have a good intuitive sense of how to play along. We had to coax Mother to open the present. Just like some children we knew, Mother didn't seem to know how (or why) to open the gift. We helped her, though, and watched her face and her changing expressions.

Mother looked puzzled at first and then looked at us to find out what to say. I helped her out by explaining that it was another pillow I had made. I showed her that the colors would go well beside the periwinkle blanket at the end of her bed. She smiled, but hesitated, and seemed at a loss for words to handle this social situation.

I asked her if she could tell what kind of flowers were appliqued there, and she was slow to respond. Then, out of nowhere, she exclaimed, "They're baboons!" Kate and I looked at each other and grinned in amazement. "Well, I can see what you mean," said Kate. "Look at the black shapes in the middle of each flower - they look like faces!" I knew that Kate and I would always remember this moment. (It would become our baboon story.) I suspect that we were both thinking about parents and children, about the way things change and move in cycles, and about the rarity of such intergenerational moments.

Kate, at seventeen, was old enough that I could talk with her about most anything. I shared with her my worries about not being there more regularly to monitor Mother's care. I told her that I worried sometimes that my brother,





Pillows - Pansies

Baboons

John, often didn't notice things which I might have noticed. When Mother had had her fall a few months earlier, I had been appalled to see how extremely long her fingernails had grown. John had visited her every day, but had not noticed her long nails. It was nice to have "girl talk" with my daughter.

The last visits to Charlotte before Mother died were poignant for me. I kept thinking how numbered her days were. They had her hooked up to oxygen, and they didn't insist on her getting dressed or taking walks. She would perk up when John or I showed up for a visit, taking comfort in our presence, as if she knew we would take care of everything for her. She was very peaceful and content. She usually apologized for being in bed, and I always reassured her that no one expected her to get up.

She must have been reliving certain events from her past as she dozed, and her comments were intriguing. One day she became animated and asked me eagerly, "How's the baby?" What baby did she mean? Was she remembering me? Later that same day she confided secrets - about her marriage - which she must have been holding in for years. I'll never know what was truth and what was a product of her overactive imagination, but at least I know she felt comfortable confiding in me.

At lunch one day I was privileged to witness the interaction between Mother and an aide. There is a fine line between cajoling and forcing, and this young woman knew well how to tease Mother into taking a bite while at the same time understanding when to back off and respect Mother's refusal to eat. I don't think you can write procedures in a training manual which adequately explain how to handle this sort of tricky situation. Mother's refusal to eat and her insistence that she had no appetite were causing her to get weaker and weaker. The staff had to determine how forceful to be, and how much to go against my Mother's wishes. I wondered how uncomfortable the young woman felt to have me there as an observer. I hope she knows how grateful I was that she handled the situation with so much grace and consideration.

I often wondered about my Mother's faith and beliefs. My father had been troubled by doubts and questions during his last days (as he suffered from cancer in 1971) and had not gotten a very satisfactory response from any of the clergy who visited him during his last weeks. I had often thought about what I might have said to my dad, so I was somewhat prepared when the topic came up. We were having a

peaceful visit one day, and Mother had taken the opportunity to tell me how much she admired me. I had always longed for this sort of affirmation from her. She wasn't just saying complimentary things to pass the time. She meant it from the heart. Then she asked, "What do you believe? Do you believe in heaven?" And I was so glad I knew how to respond.

I asked her, "What have you always heard? Haven't you always heard that you would be with your loved ones? The you will be happy? Don't you believe that your mother, and your aunts (Minnie and Mary) will be there?" Mother seemed happy to hear these words from me. No one can say what heaven will look like, but what does it matter if heaven consists of being reunited with those you love?

I took in a cassette player on my last visit. Mother was dozing, so I decided to put on a tape of orchestral music, real soft, and see if she would respond to it. There were always so many undesirable noises - of the intercom, the oxygen machine and of the other residents - that I hoped this might be a soothing improvement. She did respond a little, but not quite the way I had anticipated. I think the violins reminded her of some time and place from her past, and she remained in a half-dreaming state, not wakening enough to recognize me. I went back out into the hall and let her sleep. I was letting her go.

About ten days later, one Saturday morning, we got the news that she was gone. A nurse from the Friday night shift left a special message for us with one of the weekend nurses. Apparently, when the evening nurse went in to check on her, about ten p.m., Mother told her that she could see her aunts beckoning to her. It seems that she had no fear about the reunion up ahead. Her funeral was held on her 79<sup>th</sup> birthday. What grace and good timing!

Part of a good Southern upbringing is the dictum that certain things aren't to be discussed in public, or in private, either, and the list usually includes religion, politics and sex. I think my mother's list also included money. She had an aversion to conversations about budgets, check books, and tax returns. She had mastered the art of changing the subject whenever the conversation strayed into something which she considered tacky or too personal. The upshot of this family culture was that her three children had never had a satisfactory conversation together about their mother's assets and net worth. We didn't wish to be impolite.



What a surprise, therefore, we had, to learn what everything finally amounted to. We were impressed to learn that our financial fortunes were about to change.

I had been living a Spartan existence for several months (having sold my engagement ring, borrowed on my life insurance policy and contemplated giving up my house) and the news of a substantial inheritance was an answer to prayer. I had left a job the previous August which had provided a comfortable salary and had not figured out what my next step should be. I had been dreaming dreams of starting a non-profit organization (to serve the elderly) but had not been able to make it happen. I had also been trying to write the biography of my father's uncle, a conservationist, and had been hoping to somehow get an advance from a publisher. Now, I realized, I could use some of Mother's inheritance as an advance on my writing, and I could carry on with my efforts to start the non-profit, too.

So, in the Spring of 1998, I began an exploration of area nursing and rest homes and I stepped up my efforts to research the life of my great uncle. The next chapter in this book will be about my adventures as I reconnected with some of my relatives and as I reached out to find friends among my parent's generation.



Mother Loved  
Dutch Iris —

## Part Two

### Are You My Mother?

One of my favorite books for children - one that is particularly fun to read aloud - is the story of a young bird's search for his mother. I remember reading it to Kate and David when they were little, even when they were getting a bit too old for Dr. Seuss (a.k.a. P. D. Eastman) books. There was a well-worn copy of it in the apartment where Grandmother and Grandfather Brown lived, in Washington, D/C. On every visit there we would pull out their book collection - *Ten Apples up on Top*, *Green Eggs and Ham*, *Hop on Pop*, *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish Blue Fish* and *Are You My Mother?*

I'm not sure why I am so fond of that persistent little bird. He walks right up to all sorts of animals and objects asking each of them if they are his missing mother. He even asks a steam shovel! Fortunately, he manages to escape from harm and is, at the story's end, gently deposited back into his nest by way of the scoop of the thoughtful and sensitive steam shovel.

The bird reminds me of me, I guess. For the past year or so I have been going up to strangers and asking them, in effect, "are you lonely? Do you have any family? Would you like to have me for an adoptive daughter?" That is how I have gotten to know and make friends with many of the elderly in my town. Life for me has become immeasurably richer as a result.

### Sunnybrook

About that time, I had a conversation with a friend who owns and manages a rest home in Hendersonville, and we hit upon the idea that I might be able to help her get caught up with some of her administrative overload. I started working at Sunnybrook soon afterward. I probably didn't do much good in helping Kathy sort out any of her administrative problems, but I'll always be grateful for the opportunity I had to observe the people living and working at Sunnybrook.

The most important thing about Sunnybrook was the way in which the food, the exceedingly high standard of personal care & TLC, and the homelike atmosphere combined to rejuvenate and revitalize so many of the residents there. I was eager to try out some of my theories and techniques



Ellen with her Aunt Ellen



a special friend at the  
Hendersonville curb market





Some of my favorite books -



Sunnybrook

about conducting friendly visits, so Kathy allowed me to experiment and try my wings.

There was one resident named Galin who particularly appealed to me. Galin was ninety-nine last year, so she must be a centenarian now. Galin was energetic, stubborn and easily bored. She was hard of hearing and a bit confused about what was going on, but she often expressed rational and reasonable ideas while insisting on having her way. I tried out some children's books on her one day, thinking she might be able to read them herself. I was really gratified to notice how much she laughed over the book, *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*. I thought she seemed excited to be looking at something new and different, so I kept up my efforts to bring in silly books to her for several weeks.

I came into the living room one afternoon and saw Galin crying, with several other residents trying to cheer her up. She had apparently been telling them that she wanted to go home, and they had run out of arguments and explanations. I offered to try reading one of my books to her, and to anyone else who cared to listen. Soon I had the four of them shaking their heads in disbelief at the peculiar version of a familiar tale (the three little pigs) which I pulled from my bag. In this version, (*The Three Little Wolves and the Big, Bad Pig*) the good guys and the bad guys change places, and the final message touts the idea that we should all be flower children. It was fun for me to see how much my audience enjoyed this form of satire, and no one objected to my reading them a book intended just for children.

I didn't feel altogether comfortable with my experiments, however, and I wisely decided to postpone my playful good cheer to another time and place. I helped out at Sunnybrook for about six weeks until Kathy and I decided that I had helped enough. I continued to have some involvement there by offering to tutor two of the housekeepers, Maria and Leticia, in English. Kathy gave me permission to teach them there, in the afternoon. We all understood that English was of vital importance to both of them and to their employer. It wasn't long before I was trying to convince other nursing homes to allow their Hispanic workers to be tutored on the job.

## Trips and Reunions

Among the nice bonuses of my springtime trip were the reunions I had with several of my cousins. My father had died in 1971, and my brothers and I had drifted out of

contact with most of Dad's kin. One such cousin, Jimmy, had contacted us after Mother's funeral and had let us know he was now living in Richmond, Virginia. It was a wonderful treat for me to go by Jimmy's house Sunday afternoon and have a chance to see him again, along with his wife, his three children and seven grandchildren. By a stroke of good fortune, one of the grandchildren was being christened, so even the daughter from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, was there with her two kids. One of the sorrows about my divorce had been the loss of contact with my ex's extended family, so it was gratifying for me to know that I had so many kinfolk of my own.

I also managed to drive up to Maryland on the Saturday evening of that trip and have dinner with a woman I had never met yet who had been corresponding with me for several months. She had pictures of my grandfather whom I had never met, and anecdotes to tell which I could have listened to all night.

Arranging for long overdue family reunions became my latest passion, and in June I ventured down to Oxford, Mississippi, to pay a visit to my Aunt Ellen. At ninety, Ellen is the last remaining of my father's siblings, and I have always been very close to her. She had two sons and no daughters, so she had lavished attention on me when I was little, especially during the years when my mother was sick. Just to hear her voice on the phone makes me cry. It brings back memories of her kitchen and dining room in Richmond (of snapping beans, of drying dishes, of sneaking table scraps to Emil, the dachshund) during our stopovers there on our summer trips. (I used to think that Richmond was the obvious place to spend the night on any family trip, no matter if we were going to Myrtle Beach or Disney Land.)

I stayed with my cousin Garner and his wife Fran. I hadn't seen them since I was in college, so we had lots of catching up to do. He arranged to have his son and family join us for a meal at the nursing home, and I now have a photograph of three generations of Ellens - my aunt, Jay's daughter, and me. Aunt Ellen was looking "pink and purty" as our family saying goes. Garner and Fran go by to check on her each day, providing transportation for a private caregiver, and I have never seen a cleaner, more attractive facility.

The summer provided an excuse for another trip, this time with my daughter, Kate. She was to be a senior in the fall, and I saw this as a once in a lifetime opportunity to do some college shopping and to have a mother-daughter



adventure. Once the plans were finalized, we had appointments for interviews at Bryn Mawr and at Wellesley, and invitations to stay with friends in New York. It was a long trip and required good map reading skills and good organization.

We drove to the Poconos that first day and telephoned out friend, Susann, an East German girl who had been staying in Pennsylvania as an exchange student. She joined us for several days as we visited Boston and then drove up into New York to stay with our friends, the Sullivans. The next morning we drove up to the Museum of the Adirondacks (at Blue Mountain Lake) so that I could talk to some of the staff there about the conservation legacy of my great uncle. The girls enjoyed the museum, but they were glad when we made our way over to Lake George and found the White's camp. Bill and Mary greeted us like family and gave Kate and Susann a taste of summer at Lake George which they will always treasure. I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw the girls out in a canoe the next morning.

We hated to leave the White's hospitality behind, but we left there to drive up to the northern end of the lake, to Silver Bay. Kate (and David) had been coming to Silver Bay with an organization called FOCUS for several winters during Christmas vacation, and Kate was pleased to show me the buildings and grounds. We couldn't linger too long, however, for we had to get Susann back to Pennsylvania that evening. Kate and I were to be at Bryn Mawr the next morning for an interview.

I'm afraid that Kate will always remember our summertime trip as the time her mom "lost it" trying to find her way around suburban Philadelphia. We got to the interview about forty-five minutes late, and might not ever have gotten there if Kate hadn't finally gotten out to ask for directions. She maintained her poise and self-confidence throughout our visit there. One of the tour guides turned out to be a girl Kate had met at a FOCUS event (in Cape Cod,) so Kate felt right at home. As it turns out, Kate didn't decide to apply to either Bryn Mawr or Wellesley, for she had already gotten interested in Hollins, another women's school, in Virginia. She'll be a freshman there in the fall of 1999.

### Reclaiming My Creativity

I was working hard on my writing project between those summer trips of mine. The biography's facts and figures were constantly on my mind. I had written one long draft of

a manuscript by mid-summer, but I wasn't quite satisfied that I had hit my stride. I was reading a book called *The Artist's Way* and was noticing that creativity was simmering just below the surface of my life. I just needed to nurture it more. I was learning to value that side of me that liked to be playful, whimsical and impractical - perhaps even foolish.

I began to take an inventory of all those gifts I had made, over the years, as Christmas presents or for birthdays, which had been the fruit of my own original ideas. I was boldly purchasing garden plants and investing in the tools I needed to do all the gardening and yard work my 1.2 acre yard required. I now owned chisels for woodworking, a new Swiss Army knife for whittling, a vise, and a can of linseed oil. I was designing a wall hanging which would be hung on **my** wall in **my** house, with images which would be significant to **me**.

So far the images I had chosen were tulips (for Mother), a pelican (for my friend Greg), seven hills (as in Lynchburg, Virginia, the City of Seven Hills), a basket with apples inside (a logo for the Council on Aging), a braided circle (for Sarah's Circle) and a bunch of huge sunflowers (just because I like their sunshine.) I still hadn't figured out what to put in my quilt which could represent my father.

The braided circle had been one of my proudest accomplishments of the previous year, probably since I had been puzzling over how to make one for years. I was trying to copy a logo for Sarah's Circle, the organization I had once worked for in Washington, but had always been stumped over the difficulty of weaving the three strands just right. I was learning that, for me, the process of translating a mental image into a symbol in cloth (or wood), using my hands, was a very satisfactory therapeutic activity. I was beginning to place a value on handwork. It seemed that I could feel better connected with God when I could touch and see something I had made with my own hands.

My good friend Sarah had resigned from her job and had been casting about for a better one, so it wasn't altogether unexpected when she came by, in late July, to say she was moving to Idaho - in a week! Before I knew it, I was making plans to drive out with her, to keep her company on the drive, and to treat myself to a trip out west. I thought initially about going all the way to Seattle or to California, but the cost of airfare sobered me up on that score. I ended up flying back from Utah, instead.

Just before we left, I finished up whittling a pelican out of a scrap of wood and planned to give it to Sarah on the way. She had a birthday coming up. It was hard seeing one of my few friends off to live in another part of the country, and Sarah was one of those rare friends who had stuck with me through all of the emotional ups and down of the past few years. I knew she would always see my little wooden pelican and think of our many, many conversations.

I'm glad I ventured west with Sarah. It felt good to be doing something for somebody else and not to be wallowing in my own stuff. I knew that would feel lonely making such a drastic move by herself, without a supportive family. I could tell that it was time for me to start looking around to see how and where I could serve. I suspected that my brilliant plans for starting a non-profit organization would never materialize unless I rolled up my sleeves and got busy building relationships and making a commitment to serve. It was time to move from introspection into a more active phase - of writing and of service.

### A New Routine

A friend of mine was looking for someone to drive her grandson back and forth to school in Asheville each day, and I volunteered. I realized that taking on such a responsibility would force me to get out of the house each day and give me an incentive to get involved in Asheville. I had long been torn between activities in Hendersonville and Asheville, and this driving obligation would help me focus on just one. I also realized that I still felt the need to have young people in my life, and Daniel, at age nine, could fill that need real well.

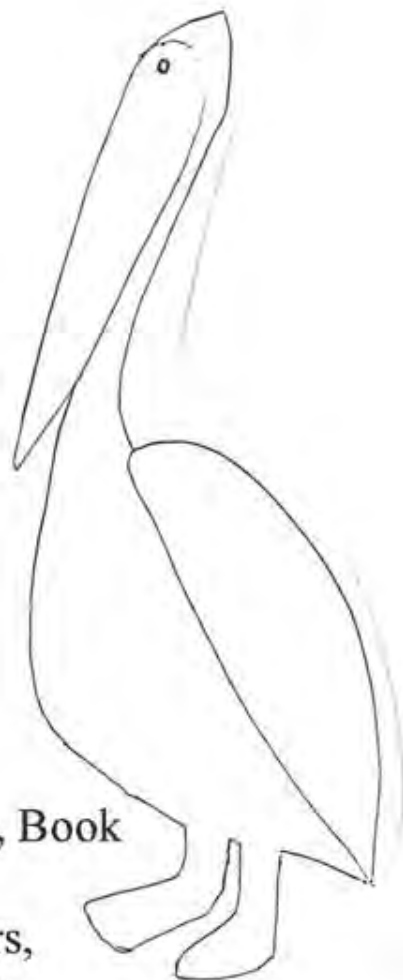
### All Souls Ministry Fair

Before the school year got started, I began investigating what I might be doing in Asheville all day long. There was a ministry fair at my church in late August, and I soon got permission to put up a display, enticing people to be volunteers at Deerfield, the Episcopal Retirement Center nearby.

I had fun preparing for the fair. I asked a friend to take photos of elderly people, and she came up with several shots which I could use on my poster. As I was sorting through all my toys, books and items of whimsy and trying to decide how to display everything, I remembered to look for the doll I had made my daughter, about ten years before, called Tall Tina. If I wanted people to be attracted to the



# Pelican Projects



## Volunteers Needed :

Pelican Pals, Collectors, Board Members, Book Lovers, Musicians, Artists, Puppeteers, Photographers, Performers, Wood Carvers, Educators, Writers, etc. (Just about anybody!)

*Deerfield Retirement Community is going through a significant expansion and is interested in developing a volunteer program to supplement the services offered there. All Souls parishioners are invited to consider becoming volunteers at Deerfield as we explore this new approach to ministry for the elderly. Once Pelican Pals gets established there, our core of experienced volunteers may have an opportunity to start up other Pelican Pals volunteer groups at rest homes and nursing homes.*

Resources and Training    Providing Good Cheer for the Elderly

display, I needed something to make them smile. Tall Tina has always been good for a laugh, with her dish-mop yarn hair, her childishy drawn pink cheeks and rose bud mouth, and her hopelessly deformed fingers.

She had been created one Christmas, when Kate was almost seven, and she had arrived with a suitcase of second-hand clothes for a spend-the-night. She and Kate were inseparable for awhile, but eventually she was relegated to a special perch in Kate's room until Halloween next rolled around. She was hung from the front porch to scare children for a few seasons and then disappeared into an almost forgotten hiding place, until I remembered her for the fair.

I knew I needed some moral support and perhaps even special permission, too, from Kate, if I was to drag Tina to a very public event at church, so I invited Kate to be my consultant. Before long we had stripped her down and started choosing a fancy white satin blouse with a lacy collar, an elegant royal blue knit suit (size 6 - one of my mother's), some gloves, a hat (50's vintage) and, to top it off, my mother's best reading glasses. Tina looked to be in her sixties or more, and she reminded me of other old women I had seen who had lost several inches in height and who had become a bit feeble and frail. Kate and I decided we could tell people that Tina wears gloves to cover her fingers which had become gnarled by arthritis.

Soon I was getting carried away incorporating Tina into my display. I decided to proclaim that Tina was looking for friends to go with her to volunteer at Deerfield, and I prepared a sign-up sheet for all the new recruits. The only technical problem had to do with Tina's impossible neck. Her head flopped forward or backward no matter how we propped it. We did finally solve the problem, however, when we tried cutting off a section of cardboard tube, slitting it at the back and attaching it to her neck, looking much like a clerical collar. It worked pretty well.

The ministry fair provided All Souls parishioners with an impression of my good intentions, even if it did not lead to immediate volunteer recruitment. I displayed samples of the toys and books which could be used by volunteers for one-on-one visits to the elderly, and many individuals sounded intrigued by the approach. I was beginning to suspect, though, that all people did not associate visiting the elderly with having fun. They looked a bit skeptical at my Pelican Pail of Fun and at all the childish objects on the table.

I had some contacts at Deerfield who had encouraged me to try to start Pelican Projects there. I was optimistic that I might be able to help the staff beef up its volunteer program, and I set an appointment with the Activities Director, the Social Services Director and one other administrator to discuss how I might help. It was hard for me to admit it at the time, but Deerfield was really not ready for my help. They were in the early phases of a tremendous expansion and reorganization, and no one on staff could give me their full attention.

I couldn't shake off my stubborn notion that I would be spending several days a week at Deerfield, but the most I was invited to do was to help in the health center for an hour on Thursday mornings while the staff had their weekly meetings.

My tutoring at Sunnybrook had continued through the summer, but I couldn't continue tutoring Maria and Leticia in Hendersonville and also pick up Daniel in West Asheville every afternoon. I hated to say good bye, so I came up with the idea of having a party at my house - for both women and all their extended families. The plans didn't get pinned down too precisely, but I bought plenty of chicken, ice cream and drinks, and I felt fairly sure that my Mexican friends would bring an ample quantity of Mexican cuisine. I was right. We all ate well that evening.

Altogether there were about twenty of us who squeezed into my dining room. Kate and David made the effort to be there for a few minutes when everyone first arrived, and I enjoyed watching Kate try out her Spanish. David and I wished we had studied something other than French. My dog, Socks, was beside herself with excitement, and did her best to greet each guest several times.

Sometimes entertaining can be a thankless exertion and sometimes it can be an unqualified success. By God's grace, my efforts were generously rewarded. It so happened that I had four or five "pails" of toys in my living room (those things which I was using to take on visits to the elderly.) Leticia's little boy discovered them, and soon the older children came over to see. Even the adult males were soon investigating the toys. I couldn't have planned as better ice breaker or party favor. Everybody had a good time.

I didn't feel quite so bashful or apologetic about buying wooden toys and children's books after that.

## The Invitation





a Pelican  
Pail of Fun



Ethel's robin

During the first week of Daniel's school, and my driving back and forth to Asheville, I stopped by the cathedral (my church.) The new dean happened to be there and remembered to pass along to me a flyer which had come to his office which he thought might be of interest to me. It was from one of the local nursing homes. The activities director had put together an appeal for volunteers to come visit with the elderly. I was excited to find out that someone was looking for help, just when I was trying to offer it.

I called Sara that afternoon and made an appointment that same week to go by and see Beverly Health Care and to find out how I might get involved there. I found out later that Sara had mailed those flyers to all the area churches and that I was the only person who responded. (Of course, I was so eager and so full of ideas that Sarah probably couldn't have handled too many more.)

I arrived at my appointment heavy laden - with poetry books, a pail of toys, and a folder full of things I had written about Pelican Projects. We babbled at each other for forty-five minutes or so, and when we came up for air, we realized that we spoke the same language and were reading from the same page of music. I knew that Sarah was delighted to have found me and that she would appreciate whatever I could do to help. And I recognized that I was finally getting an invitation to try out all my theories and get some first hand field experience. Before I left, Sarah introduced me to one of the residents who needed some special attention. I went home happily brainstorming about what I might want to talk about with Ethel on my visit the next day.

### Beverly Health Care

Sara had found out that Ethel liked to draw. I decided to take in some markers and some drawing paper. My visits with Ethel got off to an encouraging start, for she was delighted to talk about drawing things, and she promised to draw something before my next visit. She explained that she runs out of energy and just cannot find enough enthusiasm to do much else besides lying in bed all day. She got to talking about what she used to do - at home - before they brought her to this place.

I found out about her long career as a nurse, about the farm where she lived as a child, about her husband (now deceased), and about the few remaining members of her family. I didn't need to prompt her by asking questions,

for she had a seemingly inexhaustible supply of stories and information stored away which she was delighted to share with me. I soon realized that it might not really matter whether I could persuade her to draw or not. The best thing I could do would be to just listen. I left her that day with a wooden pelican (with a card in its beak which said, "Hello. I'm Ethel's Pelican Pal.") and a small photo album (for her drawings.) Ethel seemed surprised when I promised to be back for another visit soon, and she wanted to know if she owed me anything for paying her this sort of attention.

During my first several visits to Beverly Health Care I also met Chester, Margie and Harold. Although I got to know many other residents and developed a rapport with many of them, I tended to limit my visiting time to these four. I checked in with Sarah before or after each visit to keep her informed of my efforts and to get advice and direction from her. Sara and I discussed ideas for crafts and for attracting volunteers, and we both benefited from the chance to brainstorm and to commiserate. An activities director's work is never done, especially when she really cares about the well-being of each resident. I felt blessed to have stumbled onto this nursing home and to be welcomed into it.

Chester was an obvious choice for me to visit. The nurses and aides were all fond of him, perhaps because he responded so gleefully to any of our efforts. Although he couldn't talk very well and he was confined to a wheel chair, his face lit up whenever I would hand him a toy or a stuffed animal. He expressed his gratitude through offering hugs and his mumbled version of thank you. He particularly enjoyed playing with the wooden toy which has two poles which, if squeezed, cause a gymnast to flip around on the string at the top. He also got many moments of pleasure from a stacking toy and from a hand-held puppet. I never tried to stay with him for a long visit, but I included him in my rounds there most days, always remembering to have some new toy to leave behind. I never have asked Sarah what sort of physical or mental problems Chester has. I probably wouldn't do any better or any worse if I knew exactly what a person's medical diagnosis is, for my task is to experiment to figure out how to reach them. It's an art - not a science.

Margie made a big impression on me. Sara was hoping I could help her, but Margie's health seemed to be deteriorating. I went into Margie's room with my usual bucket of toys, but soon left them on the floor and reached out to simply hold her hand. Margie was having what I would call an anxiety attack. Just like a muscle contracting,



Margie was becoming tense and fearful, with her hands drawn up into fists and her eyes squeezed tightly shut. She moaned and stammered uncontrollably for several minutes until the attack subsided. All I could think to do was to hold her hand, to stroke her skin, and to say soothing things to her. She and I went through several of these cycles together, and I was grateful to notice that she began to hear me and to respond to what I was saying. When the attack would subside, she would gradually open her eyes and look into my face, sometimes with a hint of a smile forming on hers. I found myself saying, "God loves you. It'll be all right." Often when she relaxed she would try to tell me something. I had trouble making out her words, but I guessed at their meaning and said reassuring things back to her.

I was conscious of the fact that I was ministering to her in a way I had not previously intended. I knew nothing about her faith or her beliefs, but here I was talking to her of God and proclaiming my own faith. I wasn't preaching or trying to convert her, but I was finding a way to be there for her. It reminded me of the conversation I had had with my mother about religion and faith. On my second or third visit with Margie I recognized the words she was trying to say to me, "Thank you, darlin'. I love you, too."

Harold is probably the best educated and the most intellectually active among the residents at Beverly Health Care. At eighty-two, he can get around with a walker, but lower back problems keep him pretty much confined to a chair. He enjoys reading newspapers and novels, and he keeps up with most of the news on TV. Many of the staff come by Harold's room regularly to have conversation and to try to put a piece or two in his puzzle. There is always a five hundred piece puzzle in progress, an activity that gives Harold an excuse to stand up for a half hour or so and which assures him of frequent visits from many regulars on the staff. He has a new felt covered table that can just barely accommodate the tiny pieces of each puzzle. He assembles about two each week, as long as Sarah can keep him supplied with new ones.

Harold has been drafted to be on the residents' council, an honor about which he is understandably ambivalent. Sara estimates that only about ten percent of the residents could participate meaningfully on the council since most of the others either cannot get out of bed or are too feeble and confused. Harold likes to grumble about the job (he is the chairman), but he doesn't mind telling me about the good ideas he has contributed. Not too long before there had been a special meal that Harold had



Harold ↑



Ethel, with  
her favorite  
Teddy Bear





Mort and Tina ↑



Ethel's  
Wreath



requested and that he and many others had enjoyed - of fillet mignon!

I took a liking to Harold right away and, as with Ethel, I didn't have to try very hard to get him to talk to me - about his childhood, his adult life, his children and grandchildren, and so forth. I paid close attention to everything he said so that I could learn from him about his interests and perhaps bring things to show him next time that might be especially suitable. On my second visit with him I happened to mention that I had just completed writing a book (the biography of my great uncle) and was pleased to notice how interested he became. Before I knew it I had left a copy of my manuscript with him. A few days later when I dropped by, he gave me a very enthusiastic critique. I had been looking for people who might be interested in reading and reacting to my efforts, and what a surprise it was to have found such a person among the elderly in a nursing home! So much for stereotypes!

### Finding Ways to Help - Beyond One on One

Once my visits began to fall into a routine, Sarah and I began thinking about other ways I might make a contribution. She mentioned her fundraising efforts and of her wish to provide clothing to some of the neediest residents. I started thinking about what churches, school groups, Girl Scout troops and other organizations might be able to do to help. Our brainstorming led to several good things. I was successful in establishing a connection with the Asheville Catholic School and helped nudge them into starting some programs there. One of their teachers started bringing her class over to read and to bring craft items which they had made. Once the connection was established I could tell that more good interaction would develop over time.

Sara kept mentioning a store which had really inexpensive warm-ups and sweat-shirts for sale, so one day we left together and went on a shopping spree. I insisted on buying most of the clothes myself, thinking I could probably get reimbursed later through the aging committee at church. I also bought some fabric that day to use in making clown outfits. Sara had gone down to the basement and uncovered a cloth doll (named Mort) which had been in storage. We figured that Mort and Tall Tina would make a cute couple of clowns. Eventually I got the costumes completed and brought them in to show Sara. We puzzled over how to display them, and I finally had the inspiration to get a second hand stroller (from the Alzheimer's thrift shop) and positioned the pair snugly inside, with some

stuffed animals on their laps to keep them company. The pair is still in the activities room - and I hear that some of the residents enjoy taking them for a stroll.

At Halloween, Sara was planning to invite children from the area schools to come trick-or-treat with the residents. I tried to help Sarah collect make-up and costumes for the staff and the residents to wear, but I was not satisfied that that was enough help from me. To get into the Halloween spirit, I finally came up with the idea of borrowing a costume from Carolina Day School which my daughter had worn in a play the year before - that of a big blue bird! I stood outside Beverly Health Care looking like a big "blue bird of happiness" for several hours on the night of the party. I'm not sure what I accomplished aside from scaring a few toddlers who had never seen a bird so big before, but the staff took notice of me and my willingness to do crazy things.

With Christmas coming soon, I talked with Sara about decorations and craft projects. I left some fabric and other supplies there which could be used for making wreaths, but nothing much came of it. It was probably unrealistic of me to expect the staff to follow through on an idea without being there myself to demonstrate. I managed to make three or four wreaths at home in my spare time, and I made sure that Ethel had one on her door.

### Deerfield - Adjusting to a Group Activity

Deerfield is different from Beverly Health Care in several ways. Deerfield is run as a non-profit corporation (church sponsored) and Beverly is owned by a for-profit corporation. Deerfield is a retirement center, with some people living in cottages, some in the main building and some in a health care center. Beverly Health Care is a nursing home. Deerfield is going through a major expansion, with hundreds of new residents due to arrive within the next year, and there is a significant reorganization taking place as a result. I am sure that my efforts to establish Pelican Projects at Deerfield would have been received more enthusiastically and smoothly had there not been so much change going on. As it was, I had a hard time getting a blessing from the administration, and I never have felt entirely welcome.

After many conversations with administrators and staff, it finally was decided that I could best help by coming in on Thursday mornings to conduct the "reminiscences" session for residents in the health care center. The activities director and the social services director had to be in



meetings at that time each Thursday, so I was needed to help cover for them. Looking back, I must admit that I benefited greatly from the experience, though I was often left feeling frustrated and overwhelmed.

I tried to get inspired all week before Thursday morning rolled around, but it was usually late Wednesday night or early Thursday morning before I began to know what to do. I had no choice but to be creative, since there was no book of ideas to draw from, and since the suggestions I got from the staff were not very helpful. I tried to think of ways to stimulate memories of the residents there and to coax them to participate. I tried a combination of music, literature, story telling, and show-and-tell.

The first session was a lucky success. I took in a big piece of felt and assembled an array of objects on it - things which began with an A, B, or a C. I had collected an avocado, an apple, a bracelet, an angel, a bull frog, a basket, a candle, a chickadee (a bird), and many other familiar items which could be spelled starting with the first letters of the alphabet. I must have spent about thirty minutes holding up each item and asking the participants to help me remember its name. Then I folded up the felt cloth and asked the group to help me remember what items we had seen. Some participated better than others, and some could really not help at all, but there were some happy successes. This game (which I remembered playing in Girl Scouts) was a children's memory game, but it suited this group rather well. I was pleased that I had found a way to get everyone's attention, if only for a short while.

These group sessions were held in an all purpose room at the back side of the health care center. A few residents were usually there when I arrived, and others joined us over the course of the hour. Some faces and names were familiar from my visits on Bingo nights, but I had to struggle to learn most of their names. After a few weeks the staff provided me with an attendance sheet and asked me to indicate which people participated. It reminded me of being a substitute teacher - that uncomfortable feeling that I was responsible for things which no one had ever taught me. I was particularly puzzled about the gap between what I viewed my role to be and what the staff apparently viewed my role to be. I was glad to provide stimulation and good fun, but I didn't feel comfortable trying to keep records of how each person reacted. I didn't know how I should handle the sorts of problems which could arise. What if someone decided to get up and leave the room? Could they do so without assistance? What should I do for those who arrived late and didn't know what I was talking about? What if one of them



was rude and disruptive? Eventually these questions were addressed and the activities assistant was assigned to provide support.

I tried incorporating music into most of the programs. I took in a cassette/CD player for several weeks and experimented with a variety of music styles. I indulged myself in purchases of Joan Baez, Peter, Paul & Mary, Pete Seeger, and show tunes recordings, and even though it was not all familiar to the audience, it was catchy and tuneful. I tried taking in some musical instruments, too (rattles, maracas, sleigh bells, finger cymbals and a small drum,) but was soon discouraged from making so much noise. The room was used had a partition (curtain) which could be used to divide it in half, and the staff meetings were being held on the other side, so I had to adjust my planning and be much more quiet.

One of the nicest things which happened during those Thursday morning visits was my discovery that my singing (sans accompaniment) was just about right. I was a voice major in college, but there had not been many opportunities for me to put my voice to use in such a simple and natural way. I could simply take in a hymn book or a collection of Stephen Foster songs and start singing. It usually wasn't a solo for long. Others joined in. This was particularly successful at Christmas, and we could all sing together without making too much of a racket for those who were meeting in the other half of the room.

As Advent approached, I got the idea of bringing in a gingerbread house (homemade, from cardboard) and asking the residents to help me stick on the ginger cookies, graham crackers, gum drops, M&M's and Hershey's Kisses. My friend Donna came with me that day and helped us decide where to put the sweets. I was amazed at the fun we all had together, including those who simply gave advice, and those who really came with the intention of eating some chocolate. I was glad that I had done most of the engineering and construction at home, however, for this group could not have accomplished the whole house from scratch.

Near Christmas I simply took my favorite children's books and read them aloud. We laughed at the *Grinch* and his efforts to stop Christmas from coming, and we were all touched by the *Polar Express*, and the little boy's belief in Santa. I couldn't find a copy of *'Twas the night Before Christmas* so we had to try to say it from memory. I went by on Christmas Eve to see if anyone seemed lonely or blue, and I started reading a new children's book I had found, called *Silver Packages, an Appalachian Christmas Story*. One of the



Gingerbread House  
at Deerfield

women at the table was completely unresponsive to my efforts, and I assumed that she could no longer hear or speak very well. I looked over at her several times to see if she could understand the story. A relative of hers came into the room and greeted her, so I paused to let them visit before continuing the story. When I did finish reading, I looked over to her to see tears running down her cheeks. It was a humbling experience to realize that a person may be having feelings and may be comprehending what is being said without being able to give any indication. We sang a few carols after that, and I could tell the music reached her.

### The Village Inn

The church I attend (All Souls Cathedral) is located in Biltmore Village, and I began to think about how nice it would be if the church could develop a connection with a nursing or rest home in our neighborhood. Just a block away is an old hospital building which has been used as a rest home for many years - Biltmore Manor. New owners and new management have recently changed the name to the Village Inn and have erected an impressive new sign at the gate. In early October I decided to go by and introduce myself and see where it would lead.

The first person I met was the activities director, a man named Eric. He was very enthusiastic about Pelican Projects as I described it to him, and he wasted no time picking out some residents who might benefit from friendly visits from me.

He took me upstairs to the fourth floor to meet Eva. We rode up in an ancient elevator which, from what I could tell, must have been the original one installed in the early days of the hospital. Eva lives in a triple, a room with three residents, but she was alone there the day I met her. She was glad to see Eric and impressed that he had brought someone by to meet her.

Of all my newly found friends, Eva seemed to be living the most vulnerable existence. She was sitting in a reclining chair and was unable to stand up on her own. She started telling me about the doctor's appointment she had been taken to the day before, and she praised Eric for all his help in getting her there and back. She was to have cataract surgery later in the week and expressed her eagerness for having her sight restored.

The room wasn't much more modern or attractive than the elevator had been. There were exposed pipes and dingy walls, and even though Eva's bed and chair were beside a



window, the tall mature trees outside blocked most sunlight from coming in. Eva was much more lively and up-beat than her surroundings, and I knew right away that I would enjoy visiting with her. Eva's family, what few of them who were left, lived in South Carolina, and they did not get up to Asheville to visit her often. I detected a trace of sadness, but not self pity, as Eva described how few visitors ever came to see her. Apparently there was a great niece who had recently come all the way from the suburbs of Washington for a visit. The woman had driven down with three children in her car, had visited for a few hours and had then turned around and driven all the way back. She had not had enough money to afford a hotel.

I could see no photographs or any personal touches to enliven or soften the room, so I made a mental note to see what I could do to warm it up. I wondered whether Eric would be open to having someone like me do some redecorating for the facility. I could imagine asking parishioners at All Souls to help spruce things up in this dreary place. Of course, I had to wonder why the management wasn't paying more attention to appearances.

I met one other resident that day, a younger woman who seemed shy and awkward socially. She showed me all the scarves and booties she had knit, and she really perked up when I told her I had a great quantity of yarn at home that I would be glad to give her. I had been stockpiling fabric and yarn from various thrift shops without having a specific project in mind, so it was nice to have found someone who could appreciate it and put it to good use.

### Human Needs Offering

The outreach commission at church decided to let Pelican Projects be the recipient of the Human Needs Offering for October, so I wrote up a description of the sorts of items requested. I asked for people to look in their closets, attics and their drawers for those odds and ends which they no longer needed - such things as wooden toys, old calendars with attractive pictures, stuffed animals, baby dolls, and anything which might bring a smile to the face of the elderly. Some people must have thought I was crazy, but many others caught the idea and brought in some wonderful loot. Over the four Sundays I collected some wonderful books, magazines and calendars, several brand new teddy bears, a set of felt animals, a pair of wooden ducks with wings which could blow around like a weather vane, and so much more.



Eva- at the Village Inn

Over the following weeks I felt like Santa Claus taking goodies to each new friend. I took a stacking toy to Chester, a large stuffed lamb to Ethel, and a big pillow to Eva. I showed the felt animals to Eric and we talked about doing a craft activity some time to try to duplicate the alligator, the turtle, the giraffe and the organ grinder's monkey.

I went to Smiley's Flea Market one Saturday morning, for no special reason, and happened upon a table covered with delightful airplanes which the salesman had made - some out of Coke cans and some out of beer cans. I didn't need an airplane, of course, but I began to think that David might get a kick out of seeing one. They were only eight dollars, so I splurged. A few minutes later I bumped into a friend and couldn't resist showing him my impractical purchase. He was sympathetic to my silly urges, but to his friend, a weekend visitor from out of town, he said, "This is my friend, Ellen. She's in therapy." I thought about that all day. If I had been seeing a therapist, surely he or she would have approved. It wasn't long before I was telling others about my new discovery - Flea Market Therapy!

Ever since Mother's funeral I have been gradually adjusting to the notion that I can now afford to do things which I could not have afforded before. There is always a little voice that whispers to me and tells me to be cautious and careful with how I spend money. I am reminded that I would look pretty foolish and irresponsible if I were to blow this inheritance. That same voice is with me when I go grocery shopping and when I pay the bills, making sure that I remain as frugal as possible.

I'm learning, though, to pay attention to another voice, one which had never spoken very loud before. It tells me to enjoy each day, to follow my instincts, to be generous to myself. This is a fairly new concept to someone who has seen herself as a mother, a wife, and a breadwinner, in that order, before thinking of herself as a very important person with her own gifts, needs talents, and so forth. Now I am becoming very bold about buying things I love - books, arts and crafts supplies, occasional works of art, and silly, impractical stuff from thrift shops, antique shops and flea markets.

After the first month of visits to Beverly, Deerfield and the Village Inn, I was developing a habit of always taking some little gift item along to each person I visited. Especially once parishioners were helping out with their donations, it became relatively easy to fill the bucket for each trip. I was always looking for books for Harold to



read, pictures of animals for Ethel to admire, a stuffed animal for Eva, yarn for Verlene, or a toy for Chester. I suppose that there are worse habits to develop and there certainly are quicker ways to squander my money, so I'm content to keep on in this generous vein. There is most definitely a big pay-off, too. It does my heart good to hear the heartfelt thanks which come from my new friends. I know they would be glad to see me even if I always came empty-handed, but it really is fun to give.

I have always been sensitive to the complexities of giving and taking. Ethel, Eva and Harold are not in a position to be able to give me presents, so I must be thoughtful of their predicament and not allow things to get too out of balance. I am learning to think of gifts which demonstrate thoughtfulness more than dollars spent. So often I have noticed that the best gifts are the ones we can enjoy together. Ethel had never had anyone read her a Christmas story book before, and we both got teary eyed reading one together. Harold was very pleased when I brought him a bird house, but it has meant even more to him when I have taken the time to go outside and check on it for him. There was a bird tail just visible inside the last time I looked.

Of course, I get so much in return. Ethel worried about my long drive home one snowy morning, and I was reminded of all the worrying my mother had done for me. For some of my friends at Deerfield, their looks of recognition are ample reward for me. When Margaret can sing along with me and can remember some of the words to an old poem, such encouragement transforms my day. Even when the recipient of a gift cannot say a word, there is no question when the gift has hit the spot.

Ethel had a roommate for about six weeks last fall, named Mary. I only heard Mary say two words, for otherwise her speech was unintelligible, but she clearly said, "my baby." There were some small dolls and stuffed animals close to her on her bed, but they did not seem to represent the baby of her dreams. I couldn't shake off the insistence of Mary's constantly repeated request, so one day I arrived with Emily, a life sized baby doll which Kate had always loved. Emily was wearing a special kimono-style dress which Kate's godmother had made by hand many years before. I had some misgivings about bringing in something with such sentiment still attached, but Mary seemed to need it more than Kate.

Funny thing was, Ethel couldn't take her eyes off of it, and it was with great reluctance that Ethel suggested

that Mary would love to hold it. I went over to Mary's side and told her that I had brought her a baby and that she could take care of it for me. Mary reached for it eagerly and wrapped it in a motherly embrace. It came as no surprise to hear, on my next visit, that Mary had been holding tight to her child ever since. I believe that every aide and housekeeper at Beverly Health Care heard about Mary and her baby.

Then one day, Mary's bed was empty, and Ethel shrugged and explained that her roommate had died. I went looking for Emily and retrieved her from Sarah's cluttered desk. I expect I'll put Emily into another foster home some day if I find another good mother to entrust her to.

### My Dilemma

Even under the best of circumstances, a regular visitor to a nursing home is going to eventually begin to notice problems and have to face the inevitable tough decision about what, if anything, to do or say. As a member of the Henderson County Adult Care Home Advisory Committee I was becoming comfortable with my role there as an advocate. In Henderson County homes I was making visits with the express purpose of monitoring and checking on the quality of care being given. In Buncombe County and in Asheville, I had offered to provide friendship and encouragement, but not case management. I am learning how important it is to carefully define my role as a volunteer.

### At Beverly Health Care....

At Beverly Health Care there were several important lessons learned. Members of the staff were curious about my role there, and I think there may have been some concern that I was interfering, or invading their turf. I realized that it was important for me to wear a nametag (a big wooden one with a pelican drawn on the side) and to consistently be seen with my bucket of toys and books. I found that dressing up as a bird at Halloween helped establish me as that "pelican lady with the toys." To further establish trust, I came up with the idea of sponsoring a contest near Christmas which could offer cash prizes to staff members. I wanted them to know that I cared about them as individuals. I knew how low morale could dip, especially during the holidays, since these are people working in jobs with low salaries, mediocre benefits and very little affirmation.

The contest I devised consisted of soliciting "recipes" from all who worked at Beverly and promising to pay \$25 each

to the four best entries. The recipes were not to be about food but about ideas. I wanted to encourage each employee to tell about the thoughtful methods they knew for "giving care." I wanted to find out about the non-medical and often overlooked strategies nurses and aides had developed which helped bring smiles to the faces of the residents every day. The recipes were to be published in a book to be called *A Spoon Full of Sugar*. I planned to sponsor a similar contest at several other homes.

Sara and I decided on a deadline and then planned for me to attend a party a few days before Christmas to award the cash prizes to the winners. I was pleased with the ideas which were submitted and enjoyed having an opportunity to recognize all those who contributed. The long term effect of this contest has been even more gratifying, however, for I am noticing that now, even months later, I am warmly greeted by one and all. I feel accepted and welcomed to the team, and I do not feel that anyone is confused or threatened by my presence. They also know that I feel respect for them and the jobs they do.

#### At the Village Inn...

The situation at the Village Inn has been altogether different. Perhaps because the Village Inn is a rest home and not a nursing home, there are not as many nurses and aides on duty there, and it has been difficult for me to coordinate my efforts with any of the administrators. I understand that the parent company is constructing a new facility in Brevard, and I have noticed that many of the regular staff members have been reassigned there. Although I felt initially welcomed, I have been steadily disappointed in my efforts to promote Pelican Projects or to establish connections with the parishioners at All Souls. It stands to reason then that I have gradually shifted my emphasis from being a resource for providing good cheer to being an advocate, almost a volunteer case manager.

Anyone who stops to pay a visit to Eva's room will hear about her friend, Mrs. Brown, who has brought her food, stuffed animals, plants and birthday presents. Eva does have the comfort of knowing that someone cares about her and that she is not alone. She has a wonderful disposition and has been able to make friends with most of the aides and housekeepers who work on her floor. The main problem for Eva is the fact that she does not like or cannot eat most of the meals which are served. Eva has always enjoyed cooking, and even my mouth waters to hear her describe the way she used to prepare meat and vegetables. For someone who has



grown up on a farm and eaten chitlins, greens, and other Southern delicacies, institutional food is a nightmare.

I have listened for months to Eva's commentary and have tried to weigh the facts. The foods she loves and misses are not likely to ever come out of the kitchen downstairs, so I have learned to listen sympathetically and try not to interfere. The trouble is, however, that Eva refuses to eat meat, mashed potatoes, rice, chicken (white meat), or white breads. She has lost so much weight that her teeth are loose. I keep wondering whether anyone is genuinely concerned about her diet and nutrition. How much should I get involved?

I tried to offer the recipe contest to the staff, but Eric and I never could coordinate our efforts. There were many days when I could find no appropriate person to report to, and I began worrying that the management was falling apart. That is one of the greatest risks in becoming a volunteer. I am prepared to experience loss and disappointment in working with individuals, but I am tremendously saddened to be confronted by such institutional roadblocks and failures. The lesson I'm learning is to be prepared for disappointments in working with administrators and institutions. The challenge is to support the people working in the trenches while confronting the mistakes which are being made at the top. So often, the nursing assistants are blamed for problems which are a direct result of poor training, understaffing and inadequate supervision.

### Seeking Friends Closer to Home

With the start of a new year, I resolved to seek out elderly friends in some homes in my neighborhood, to save on gasoline and to allow me more time to be at home to write. Heritage Health Care is one of the facilities which I am assigned to visit with our county advisory team, so it seemed a logical place to start. Donna, the activities director and Roger, the social services director, were both delighted to have me get involved. I started attending the weekly residents' meetings and became intrigued by the possibilities.

Heritage has a higher percentage of residents living there who are physically and mentally capable of participating in activities than I had observed at Beverly. The residents who attended the meetings were able to articulate their concerns and had been doing so for many months. There were complaints about meals not getting served in a timely fashion, about clothing which was lost by housekeepers, and about transportation to appointments. I



*the fabulous kitchen at Sunnybrook*



*Jackie giving some T.L.C. at Sunnybrook*



got interested in finding ways to empower the residents to find solutions to some of the problems. We wondered if volunteers could be trained to help serve meals or perhaps even to feed certain residents. We wondered if one or two resident volunteers could help sort clothes, and we wondered if residents could not also be allowed to help serve ice water or to distribute mail.

I offered to work on a newsletter with the help of some of the residents, and I came in several times to conduct some interviews for the first issue. I also decided to try out being an "ice water girl" and came in four days one week to explore that as a volunteer job. I borrowed a volunteer notebook from Donna and studied all the forms and job descriptions which had been written years before. I met with the Executive Director and helped plan for a volunteer appreciation tea to be given in April. No matter how I tried, though, I did not feel very well connected with the staff and organization. It seemed to me that I was spinning my wheels and getting nowhere. The lesson here is obvious. I cannot expect to initiate a successful volunteer program at an institution without having full access to those in charge. Unless I could attend staff meetings and be treated as a member of the team, I would be unsuccessful at organizing an effective volunteer program.

Volunteers are involved in every facility I have visited. Many volunteers have been recruited to sing, preach, read, help with special events, and lead discussions. In most facilities the activities director has responsibility for scheduling volunteers to appear, so they are considered the volunteer coordinators. I know of no facility which has a paid volunteer coordinator, and I have only found a few homes which have established any sort of auxiliary of volunteers which can help by recruiting new volunteers and by fund raising. I am convinced that volunteers are an untapped resource which, if tapped, could transform these institutions into warmer, happier homes.

I started visiting a resident at Autumn Care, a nursing home in Saluda (in Polk County.) The activities director there has been very enthusiastic about Pelican Projects, and we plan to meet with some of her regular volunteers soon to see about starting up an auxiliary. I think that a volunteer auxiliary could take over many of the chores which ordinarily fall to the activities director. Local volunteers know the community and can recruit volunteers, raise money, organize new classes and help promote the needs of the facility in the wider community.



I have also been in touch with the activities director at the Brian Center in Laurel Park. We are planning a meeting with her volunteers soon to see if they might like to get organized into an auxiliary. Brian Center has many active and dedicated volunteers who contribute many hours each month. I hope that some of them will appreciate how nice it would be for them to work together to support the staff and enhance the community spirit.

I have come full circle in my journey through the adult care homes of my neighborhood. I have returned to Sunnybrook recently and am struck again with the excellence of care, the wholesome food and the non-institutional atmosphere. I have not come up with a recipe yet for the perfect size and shape of the ideal home, but I am sure about one thing. All of our institutions need good hearted people to offer to get involved. We all have gifts to share and we all have much to gain. Our children need to spend time with our parents, and each of us need to build relationships across the generations.

Now that this research phase is complete, I plan to try offering my talents as a teacher of creative quilting. I expect that most of the homes I visit will have a few residents who might like to work with fabric and make some simple but original designs. I have been working on an applique quilt for my daughter, and I think that anyone who can see well enough to sew can design and make a pillow. The real objective, though, is to give me a chance to work with a small group of people on a regular basis. It would be fun to do the same sort of activity week after week, and I'm sure we would all get to know each other well. Perhaps that is the secret for me in my search for adoptive parents. I need to pick a facility which is convenient and make a lasting commitment there.



Smiley's Flea market



my whimsical friends

### **Part Three**

#### **Tapping Into Creativity**

Here is a list of some ways a person might get plugged in at a home :

Computer skills - Many facilities have computers which have been donated for the use of the residents, but the staff has little free time to supervise. Offer to teach and supervise!

Flower Arranging - If you are good at arranging flowers, find out if the facility wants help. They may need special arrangements at holidays, or they may want something provided to residents on their birthdays. You might offer to teach some of the residents how to help you, and you may know of a garden club or a florist which might donate flowers and other supplies. There is no limit to the joy this would bring.

Love of Literature - A book worm might help a nursing home in many ways. He could start a book mobile and recruit others to wheel it around. He could contact the local library to make sure that large print books are made available, and perhaps books on tape. In talking with individual residents a dedicated book lover might track down unusual books and magazines which match each individual's interest. Of course, many people would love to have someone read aloud from their favorite works of literature. Offer to do something specific, and the activities director will be thrilled.

Like to Entertain? Host a monthly tea party! I got this idea from Heritage Health Care. One of their volunteers initiated a tea party in recent months and it is a big success. Six to eight residents attend. The hostess uses real china and silver, and the food is elegant, too. They are encouraged to wear nice clothes and to come prepared to talk about interesting and polite topics - no complaints about the management and no arguments about politics.

Are you an Artist? So many of the activities at rest homes and nursing homes tend to be straight out of activity books, with everyone making doilies or coloring in childish cartoons, and very little creativity or originality is inspired. An artist could think up fun things to do with paints, fabric, glue, buttons, cardboard, and even litter, transforming junk into abstract works of art. If I can make



a decent gingerbread house out of old boxes, just think what a real artist could do!

Do you like to sing? Don't wait for an orchestra or a piano player, just start going in and take along words to songs you love. You will find that you don't really need to distribute the words to everyone (many cannot read, anyway.) Of course, instruments are nice, if you play one, and a second singer is great (so you can have some harmony.) Cassette tapes can work well, too. Don't forget that people living in nursing homes do not usually listen to the radio, and they cannot find much music on television, so there are thousands of songs which they might not have heard in years. Try show tunes, gospel, country, folk, and whatever else you may know.

Good Listener? Many people are starved for a friendly visitor. I think that taking the time to sit down and talk with someone does them more good than just about anything else. Some preachers go in these places and holler at the residents about what they should do to be saved, but I think most people really prefer having someone just talk. Loneliness is one of the most prevalent problems, and everyone gets blue. Just be a friend.

Stay at Home Mom? Bring in your infants or toddlers for a weekly visit. Let a few friends hold your baby, or push him in his stroller. This is a guaranteed success. Try it!

Are you a chef? There are always some people in these places who are finicky about what they eat. With permission from the authorities, you might try fixing up a special meal for someone who is unhappy about the cuisine, and they'll be ever so grateful.

If you like to bake, there are lots of suggestions for you! Birthday cakes are always appreciated, though some of the larger facilities lump all the birthdays together once a month, so you'd only be baking one a month. Some places encourage their residents to be in a cooking class, so your help would be nice. You could come up with some unusual recipes, or perhaps demonstrate your cake decorating skills.

Do you like to do woodcarving or otherwise make things from wood? If you plan carefully, you might be able to think of some toys which you and a group of residents could sand, paint and assemble. There may not be many people living there who can handle a knife, but they might enjoy the finishing and decorating. Most projects can be adjusted to suit the skills of the participants.

Do you like puppets and plays? There is no limit to the possibilities for doing drama with the elderly. They might enjoy paper bag dramatics or they might like watching puppets. It might be fun to have them make their own puppets and then have them write a simple play. I had middle school students act out fables and myths, and I should think that older folks would be very resourceful in thinking of stories to enact.

Have you been a world traveler? Bring in your slides and home movies. It is a good way to help stimulate memories.

Do you know how to perform magic, or are you a clown? Both of these talents are in great demand. Maybe you could teach one of the residents to be a clown or do a magic trick.

Are you a collector? Just about any kind of collection would be of interest to the residents. One lady brought in her elegant collection of hats, and everyone had a ball trying them on. Even an old trunk of dress-up clothes can liven up an afternoon. I think that we all like to indulge in a little make-believe.

If you are a bird-watcher, many residents might appreciate your help in identifying the birds which visit their feeder. If there aren't many bird houses or feeders around, perhaps you can think of a way to have some made or donated. I have a friend who has been watching his bird house with eager anticipation all spring. First there was no activity, then we thought some chickadees went in and out, then nothing, and now they are back. I can hardly wait to find out what happens next!

Do you home-school your children? Bring them over to a nursing home once a week and give them assignments. It can be about oral history, about learning a new skill from one of the elders, or it can be reading out loud. Your children will get attached to the friends they make, and they will always thank you for nudging them to be there.

Do you have a garden club, a book club, a service organization, a church class, a Girl Scout Troop, or any other group with which you are affiliated? Brainstorm with them about fun things you all could accomplish with the home in your neighborhood.

Do you like to drive in the mountains on a weekend afternoon? Invite a senior to go along. Some people literally never go outside again after entering a nursing

home, even though they are physically capable of walking to a car and sitting on the front seat.

Do you know all about nutrition? Give talks at the homes of your choice and help the residents and staff learn about how better eating habits can improve health and fitness. Many people don't seem to know how important liquids are, and ignorance about diabetes is epidemic.

Do you like to dance? Offer to lead an exercise or dance class. Even those who are in wheel chairs will enjoy the music and the rhythm, and nearly everyone can move a little. You might take in some rattles or tambourines so the everyone can join in the commotion.

Whatever it is you know how to do and enjoy doing, it is probably something which could be offered in some shape or form at homes in your town. If none of the suggestions above have inspired you, well, try offering to deliver mail to the rooms, or help sort the laundry. If you want to ease your way in slowly, perhaps the administration will let you come once a week to pour ice water. That would give you a chance to get acquainted with the residents without feeling that you'll be obligated to help some individual.

The unavoidable fact is that each of us is a "Missing Ingredient." I sincerely hope we all will be inspired to try contributing our talents somewhere, sometime, but soon.