



# A LONELY, LOVING ROLE

## As people live longer, more seniors become caregivers

By DENISE M. BARAN-UNLAND

dunland@shawmedia.com

She wants to stay at home. We don't want her to be away from us.

That's why Lyle Wiggins, 96, is the primary caregiver for his wife, Lavon Wiggins, 94, who was diagnosed a decade ago with Parkinson's disease.

Lyle Wiggins of Joliet said he does have adult children who help at night and when they can. But generally, Lyle cares for Lavon by himself during the day. This includes lifting Lavon in and out of bed and her wheelchair, and taking her to the bathroom, as well as driving to the grocery store ("My driver's license is good until 2017," Lyle said) and doctor's appointments.

Lyle, a World War II veteran, doesn't mind playing hero on the homefront to the woman he married 74 years ago. He recalled Lavon as the beautiful brunette in his typing class at a Minnesota business college and said he is happy to care for her needs.

"She's been very patient to put up with me all these years," Lyle said. "She's very kind and loving and doesn't get upset with me very often, so I try to please her. We get along very well."

### GIVING CARE

About 30 percent of the caregivers in the support group Kathy Miller leads at Easter Seals Joliet Region are older than 70. Tom Johnsrud, executive director of Senior Star at Weber Place, said the average age at the facility's support groups is 85.

"We have one couple that is going to be celebrating their 76th wedding anniversary," Johnsrud said.

People are living longer and healthier lives, Miller said, which increases the odds that spouses will become caregivers. Despite the availability of various resources – such as home health aides and assisted living – overseeing complete care of an elderly person

is never easy. That process becomes complicated when the caregiver – who might be a spouse, sibling or even an adult child – also is older and has health concerns, and when the person requiring care has cognitive impairment or dementia, Miller said.

"If you don't have anybody with you in the house when you're giving care to someone with a memory problem, it gets very lonesome, so I'm very blessed that I do have help [from family]," said Richard Sievers, 83, of Minooka, who also runs a storage facility.

But constantly monitoring a person with dementia is stressful, even with help. Although Richard's wife, Helen Sievers, 82, can no longer perform household chores, she still thinks she can, he said.

On occasions, Helen puts dirty clothes in the dryer or tries to make tea by heating an electric kettle on an electric stove. Worse is the loss of Richard's lifelong companion.

"If I want to reminisce about something in the past, she has no idea about what I'm talking about," Richard said. "If I show her a picture of the grandchildren, she can't name them anymore and she's not even sure they're grandchildren. There's just no meaningful connection."

Other meaningful connection might also disappear. Johnsrud said caregivers might become so focused on "their job" they stop participating in social activities. The isolation might intensify if their children don't live in the area, he said.

Ed Vascik, 87, of Plainfield, said he cared for his wife, Mary Vascik, 85, at home until keeping continual watch on her became impossible and she went to live at a memory care unit close to his home.

But such a move doesn't eliminate

doubt ("You wonder if you're making the right decision"), separation ("People don't understand how much this affects the caregiver"), one's own shortcomings ("I don't have the energy I had when I was younger") and grieving the loss of a cherished spouse while she is still alive, even though Ed visits Mary nearly every day.

"I try to keep busy during the day," Ed said, "but evenings are a killer."

Louise Price, 74, of Romeoville, said she kept her husband, Jerry Price, who died in December, at home until October. For the past several years, Louise was Jerry's full-time caregiver, until his Parkinson's disease severely restricted movement of his hands and feet and repeatedly caused him to fall.

"I had to call 911 many times to get him off the floor because I could not pick him up," Louise said.

Looking back, Louise said she is amazed at her ability to care for Jerry's needs at home, even when people doubted it was feasible.

"You can do a lot more for someone you love than you think you can when the time comes," Louise said.

But nonstop caregiving can tax the providers and affect their own immune systems, Miller said. Even if caregivers are resilient and try to stay healthy and strong – Lyle Wiggins said he exercises every day – what happens if they are unable to provide care, even temporarily?

This is especially troublesome for seniors with memory issues, who may lash out at unfamiliar people, Miller said.

"We had one gentlemen with a business trip planned and he had some friends that were going to take care of his wife," Miller said. "When he came back after a week, they said, 'We can't do this again.'"



Eric Ginnard - [eginnard@shawmedia.com](mailto:eginnard@shawmedia.com)

**Lyle Wiggins, 96, sets down placemats on the kitchen table Feb. 23 before making lunch for his wife, Lavon Wiggins, at the their Joliet home.**