

By Jim Langham

Putting puzzle pieces together in caretaking

I was 14 years old when we discovered that my Grandma Langham had cancer. The fact that the discovery was made at one of the happiest times of her life made the circumstances seem even more sad than the uncovering of the illness itself.

My grandpa (Jim Langham, also) had passed away 10 years earlier, when I was 4. For most of my childhood, she had lived with the grief of his loss, until one day when she met a nice gentleman, a farmer from the Woodburn area where she lived. Amazing to me, they courted, fell in love and they announced a marriage.

During their time of courtship, Grandma started to limp with a pain in her hip, one that she assumed to be arthritis and treated as such. She limped down the aisle in a beautiful wedding dress on that beautiful spring day in 1962. Little did she and her new husband realize that their time together would be so short.

Within a month of their marriage, she saw a doctor and was given the grim news that she was actually suffering from bone cancer in her pelvis area. As the suffering increased, my mother left our home in Berne and assisted in becoming a 24-hour caretaker of my grandma as her life quickly deteriorated to that of constant morphine shots to help the pain subside. For three months, my dad and I drove to Woodburn on weekends to spend time with them and my mother, the dedicated caretaker of her mother-in-law.

I was still young, but during that time I began to understand the meaning of caretakers, those who put their lives on hold to assist another – cancer patients, physically handicapped, mentally handicapped, children with Down's Syndrome, those who are autistic, all cared for by one with a dedicated soul, big heart, selfless energy and grit beyond understanding, filled with love for the unfortunate.

I always respected my mother for her ability to care for my Grandma Langham and her mother (who lived with us until she passed). The neighbor down the street who selflessly cared for autistic son until she passed away at age 83, plus nurses, nurse's aides and countless others who alone are worthy to march in the "caretakers' lap" at the local Relay For Life each year.

But, back to the neighbor down the street whose son, Max, was apparently born with autism and other accompanying disorders. For nearly 60 years, she placed her life on hold, got up at 4:30 a.m. to prepare his lunch to go to community services, worked feverishly during the day to prepare his supper and snack, wash his clothes and voluntarily absorb the misunderstandings and hurtful moments that accompanied his care.

One thing that Max always enjoyed was putting puzzles together, not big ones, but children's puzzles and especially puzzles with pictures of animals. He had a little shelf with many puzzles that were given to him for Christmas and his May 24 birthday each year by those who understood and knew the meaning of puzzles in his life.

When Max passed away, after many years of care by his devoted brother following their mother's death, I was asked to be the officiating minister for his funeral. Fortunately, I loved and understood Max. I had helped care for him on a few occasions; I knew his love for animals, putting together puzzles, McDonald's sandwiches and rides through the countryside. I had seen him laugh when those around him laughed and I had been in his presence at times of misunderstood eruptions. Max had become like a brother to me over a lifetime.

So, when I finally put together the meditation for Max's funeral, I took a puzzle and each time I talked of another virtue, I put a piece in the picture. Finally, I finished with one piece missing, so it seemed. Then, I picked up that piece and referred to it as "heaven's piece," Max's completion, the eternal healing that finally put the final piece of the puzzle in place for him.

Being a caretaker has many pieces to a puzzle that seems confusing, one that sometimes seems like it will never come together. There are pieces of fatigue, dismay, frustration and misunderstanding. Then there are those pieces of satisfaction, being with that loved one during extraordinary moments when they do or say something we would never expect and the joy and love that comes with bringing happiness and comfort to that person's life.

So now, I hold one more piece of a puzzle in my hand ... it is a piece from my heart to all caretakers who have invested or are investing their lives in the care of another. I place it the picture of your hearts with a prayer that some time you will see who you were caring for our all along, actually it was our Lord, as He described in the scriptures.