

## **My Experience as a Volunteer with Community Caregivers, by Marcia Hopple**

I learned about Community Caregivers from a brief item in the newspaper, at just the time I was thinking I might look for such an organization. My mother had died about a year earlier at age 87, and before that she and I enjoyed visits at her apartment near Cleveland when I would take her out for drives, shop, cook, and take walks with her, play Scrabble, and of course talk. I wanted to visit an elderly woman or man who would appreciate some company and conversation as she had.

It also happened that I began working in Albany at about the time I contacted Community Caregivers. I live in Rensselaer County, about 13 miles from my job, but I wanted to take a volunteer assignment near my office. A few months later, I was matched with Lily, who has been fascinating to learn about during the year and a half we have visited on a weekly basis.

Lily and I are not likely to have met any other way than through a match like this. She is 85, a concentration camp survivor from Czechoslovakia, and an observant Jew who keeps kosher. I am a non-practicing Protestant, age 61, who grew up in the suburbs and now lives in a rural township. Ironically, it turns out I know of her son, a professor at one of the colleges where I have been an administrator over the years, but I don't usually meet the parents of the professors!

Lily and I like to talk about the village where she grew up, one of nine children I think, and we especially enjoy looking back at the fact that families grew their own food, prepared everything from scratch, and preserved fruits, vegetables and meats. Lily is surprised by the fact that I garden and am an old fashioned cook, which she thought had long ago died out everywhere. Lily often comments on how hard her mother worked, and how the children helped as they reached their teen age years.

In Lily's case, when she finished school at about age 15 she went to live nearby with a much older sister and helped with the care of the small children in that family. Lily told me that a beautiful girl born to her sister died at age two or three, from a sickness, and that it had been heartbreaking for the family. But, Lily said, she is glad that child died then, at home, instead of later in the concentration camps. Most of Lily's family, the many siblings and their spouses and children, were killed by the Nazis. The only way I hear about it from Lily is in rare references like the one above, which burn themselves into my heart as they slip out unexpectedly in the way that her comment about the child's death did.

Lily's health is failing and she is discouraged about being old, but we both enjoy our weekly talks and whatever I can squeeze in between regular visits—a container of homemade vegetable soup for her to portion out, a post card from my travels, a note that brightens her routine mail. Fortunately she has other visitors, especially family, and she gets out fairly often for doctor appointments and community center dinners and occasional walks. So she thrilled me the other day when I called to say I could not come on my usual schedule, and she said “There is no one I would rather see than you.” That is a priceless reward of being a volunteer!

Marcia Hopple, Community Caregivers Volunteer