

Aging in Place Salt Spring Style: What Are You Afraid Of?

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6th in series

“They’re making me live at *Brinkworthy*,” Florence exclaimed, tears flowing down her cheeks. “I don’t *want* to live at Brinkworthy.”

It was mid-September, 1999, and I had come into the Sun Room at Lady Minto Hospital to join my then-husband, Donald Simmons, for lunch. Florence was a lovely little lady no doubt in her mid-eighties, learning how to walk again after a broken hip. We’d made friends with her while Donald was trying to recover from a stroke.

Despite being nineteen years older than I, Donald was once a highly-active man and, when we first got together, was in far better shape than I. But high blood pressure can be stealthy and that summer he experienced a stroke so massive he was confined to a wheel chair for the rest of his life. We’d been planning a late-summer drive to Ontario and now our travel was me taking him for walks around the hospital grounds. We ate lunch every day with Florence.

Poor Florence! She wanted to go home, but she was fragile and no longer able to live on her own. The long-term-care case manager recommended she live at Greenwoods; Donald was to live at the Extended Care Unit at Lady Minto. Like Florence, I cried when I heard the news. When bubbles burst, tears flow. It’s inevitable.

Getting beyond the emotions surrounding where we might find ourselves living in our declining years, it’s important to understand that if we can’t perform the activities of daily living, then we need long-term care. For example, if you don’t know what a tooth brush is for, how to put on your clothes, or where to find the toilet—or, in Donald’s case, if you are physically unable to do these things by yourself—then long-term care is essential. If you choose to stay home, you can hire help (these days it generally costs \$25 an hour for private care); you can get subsidized care through Beacon Community Services (1-887-658-6407); but mainly you’ll be relying on a spouse or another relative to help you.

We long-term family caregivers tend to believe nobody else in the world can take care of you as well as we. We try our best, but tending to your every need, day and night, places such a heavy burden on our own health and emotional wellbeing we burn out after a while. If we’re fit and take care of ourselves, we last about three years providing you with 24/7 care. Sometimes, though, we keel over in the line of duty.

Back in the Sun Room, Florence was distraught; I promised to visit her. She brightened, but tears soon flowed again as she babbled again about “Brinkworthy.” It was only a name and, in this case, the wrong one. What she really feared was the losing control in a world she no longer understood.

Several years earlier, I was so afraid of “Greenwoods” I couldn’t bring myself to walk in the front door to donate some videos. Indeed, when I first heard “long-term care” for Donald I sank into emotional quicksand. Fortunately, a friend accompanied me on a brief tour at Lady Minto ECU; otherwise, I would have stayed in bed.

Moving day for Florence arrived, and I’d become strong enough to push Donald and his wheel chair up the hospital parking lot hill and through Greenwoods’ back door. We were directed to the dining room where the residents were lingering over lunch. We soon spied Florence seated with three other ladies of similar vintage and mental acuity. She was leaning forward, eyes bright, telling a story from her good old days. They were smiling and hanging on every word. Donald and I wheeled up to say hello; Florence smiled, but clearly preferred telling her story to her new friends. Just like that: She was at home!

When we get to the point where we can no longer take care of ourselves, Greenwoods is a great place to live. There are a wide variety of activities, including music and art therapy programs generously supported by the Lady Minto Hospital Auxiliary which raises funds through its uptown Thrift Shop. As soon as the new Blain Road garden is ready later this summer, hopes are high for a garden therapy program. Volunteers assist in offering activities ranging from summer barbecues to winter pizza nights; from magic shows to scenic rides; from Sunshine breakfasts to afternoon concerts. In case you’d like to see for yourself, why not check out the new Greenwoods website at greenwoodseldercare.org. If that address doesn’t work for you, just google it.

Nobody needs to be afraid of Greenwoods.