

Clare's Story

Clare has Alzheimer Disease.

She lives in a stranger's house, in a stranger's bed. Strangers come to her and make her do things that she would never in her whole life do, just because a stranger asked.

She'll be lying in bed all cozy and they tell her that it's time to get up. (I'm still tired!) They take off her clothes and put on different ones that are chilly. (I'm cold!) They tell her that it's time for breakfast (No! I want to go back to bed!) They give her juice to drink (I don't like that!) They wash her face (Leave me alone!) They brush her teeth (Ouch! My teeth hurt!). They give her her pills (I'm not sick! I don't need them!) They bath her (How dare you put me in water like that!)

She screams! She screams and they tell her to be quiet – to sit still while they brush her hair. She screams and they leave the room in frustration. Then they leave her alone. She screams and they go away and leave her in peace. She screams and they get her out of the water quickly. She screams and they get frustrated. (They deserve it. How dare they do these things to me!)

This is a common scenario for people with Alzheimer disease. The staff can be as patient and kind and calm as possible, but often the affected person is indignant no matter what effort is made to make personal care a pleasant experience.

When I was working full time at a long- term care facility, myself and another therapist had the privilege of helping at times like this. In my case, it was agreed that I should go to work early – before breakfast, while morning care was in progress. Residents who were inclined in the way that Clare was inclined during morning care, were referred to me. Permission to be present during personal care was requested of families and most consented. I was able to team up with the Personal Support Worker (PSW) and help make the experience calmer, and more pleasant for both the resident and the staff.

One day, I was outside the room and heard Clare's screams. I poked my head in the door of the room and asked the PSW if I could try and help. The PSW said 'Yes! Anything!' Clare screamed as her cardigan was being buttoned. I went in with my guitar and played a lullaby. 'Too ra loo ra loo ra' Clare's screams stopped immediately. She turned and looked and smiled. Her face changed immediately from one of anxiety to one of calm. Right away she started to sing. 'Hush now, don't you cry'. Her hair is now being brushed, then 'Jesus Loves Me, this I know'. "I sang in the church choir" she exclaims. 'My mother was an organist!' Clare's voice is beautiful – clear and strong. ' You are my Sunshine'. She engaged with me and the care that she was receiving was secondary, and no longer her focus.

The PSW was able to finish her care in peace. I stayed a little longer and Clare continued to sing when the care was done. She rested peacefully afterward.

Later on I saw her rolling herself down the hallway, with a song still on her tongue.

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