

THE AUTHORS SHOW – Nonfiction Self Help

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Everyone is a potential caregiver. Sometimes we can foresee this possibility. What I learned from my own experience is that I was not ready when the call came, alerting me that someone needed immediate help and I was thousands of miles away. In today's world, we very often do not live near our families, who need our help suddenly and without warning. When the crisis strikes, to help those in need, it can mean dropping everything, leaving home or work, leading to an array of challenges. In my case, before I knew it, I was packing my bags, hopping on a plane, getting in my car, managing crisis calls, desperately trying to keep it all together. It can be a time filled with unknowns.

In my book, *When Family Calls: Finding Hope in the Chaos of Long Distance Caregiving*, I share my stories about my five family caregiving experiences spanning fifteen years. My first role as a caregiver began with a check-in phone call to my parents. This led to my immediate need to drop everything and travel to another state. This routine call started my caregiving journey. My experience with helping my father and mother, was followed by my aunt and uncle and then my brother with his battle with cancer.

Not one of us has a crystal ball to predict if we or, a friend or family member, will have a stroke, accident, be diagnosed with Dementia/Alzheimer's, cancer or, any major life changing disease. Given this, we must plan for the worst, hope for the best and make plans early. In my family this did not happen, leaving me with five unexpected long-distance, and sometimes nearby caregiving experiences, where very little pre-planning before their life-changing, critical incident or diagnosis occurred.

My background as a clinical and school social worker, with a master Degree of Social Work, provided some helpful knowledge and skills needed to oversee my family's care. What it didn't prepare me for, was the emotional roller coaster ride.

Here is an excerpt from *When Family Calls*, describing my first call-to-action:

“Happy Halloween, Mom?”

“How are you?” I asked.

She hesitantly answered, “Well it’s not very happy here.”

“Why is that?” I asked.

She replied, “Your father is acting weird.”

I asked more questions. What is he doing? What do you mean by “weird”?

Alarms went off in my head. Fourteen years before this fateful phone call, my mother had suffered a closed head injury from a bike accident and was left with some limitations.

Given this factor, I was especially concerned and felt overwhelmed with a feeling of panic. My heart raced and I found myself trying to find the right questions to ask my mother. I struggled to figure out what she meant by weird and to learn how long my father had been behaving in a “weird” way.

My mother sounded scared and was reticent to answer my questions. She repeated that he was,

“Just acting weird.”

I was on a plane from Florida to Michigan in less than twenty four hours. This was the beginning of my journey as a caregiver. I was in a position to help, and with the support of my husband, my role as a family caregiver began. Each subsequent call required my help. Each call presented new unique situations, needs and lessons.

When Family Calls, is not a “how to” manual, but instead shares feelings, family background and what I learned and how I survived five very challenging and rewarding caregiving experiences. Each circumstance carried with it different critical needs, including financial, legal, end of life planning, finding the right care or placements, medical and/or mental health concerns, moving people, which included issues surrounding familial relationships and the

resulting emotional reactions. I learned many times over how essential it is, to know as much as we can ahead of the call, as well as having pre-planning in place so that when the call comes to be a caregiver we are better prepared.

One of the reasons that I wrote “When Family Calls,” was in response to a friend who commented, “You should write a book about your caregiving.” I had written three helping books for children for issues surrounding trauma and loss, difficult moves and bullying, but never a book for adults. This comment helped me realize that what I learned could indeed help others. With every family member I helped, I learned something new such as how to navigate the varying systems and finding resources in different states, and how to best advocate for someone, who can no longer express their wants and needs. I had five hospice experiences, giving me much insight into the need for end of life planning, as well as how both difficult and rewarding it was to be there to help five close family members in their time of need.

My lessons learned can help future, current and past caregivers and, anyone needing care themselves. Pre-planning may not prevent us from getting injured, sick or old, but it is essential for helping family and/or friends help us, to help them. Finally, when we may not be able to care for or help ourselves for reasons outside of our control, getting our own affairs in order, before a crisis will help others help us when the call comes.

My sincere hope, is that by sharing my family stories, it will help readers avoid some of the unexpected challenges of long-distance and near-distance caregiving. Writing my story was cathartic, helping me process much of what I experienced in a productive way. I was reticent to put my personal family stories out into the world, but since I have done so, I have had tremendous and heartening feedback, as well as validation, that it was the right thing to do. Each story provides different important tips and suggestions, as well as resource information and/or how to get the help you may need for yourself and those for whom you are or will be providing oversight or direct care when the time comes.

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