

My Mother-In-Law Irene!

February 2023 Caregiver of the Month, Jennifer Chappel
Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services



Jennifer with her family and Irene.



Jennifer with nominator.

Jennifer Chappel has spent the past 20+ years caring for the low income and homeless population of Ray and rural Clay counties as a caseworker at The Good Samaritan Center, a small non-profit in Excelsior Springs, MO. For this, she is well known and beloved in the community. What most people do not know is that Jennifer is a caregiver in her family, providing routine support to her mother-in-law, Irene.

Jennifer and her husband, Jeff, made the decision to move Irene in with their family 15 years ago after Irene's husband passed away. Irene had begun to struggle with depression which resulted in a debilitating lack of motivation. They believed having their children around, who were three and six years old at the time, would keep Irene motivated and moving which worked well until her health declined.

Now 86 years old, Irene requires constant attention and regular assistance with meal preparation, feeding, bathing, medications and other activities of daily living. Jennifer and her husband provide Irene's routine care each day. Jennifer explained, "Now we have to find ways to motivate her (Irene) to get out of bed each day. It is much easier to do when one of the kids come home for a visit." Irene loves her grandchildren. They have been a constant support over the years.

Jennifer describes her role as a caregiver, "My husband and I made the commitment to keep my mother-in-law in the home with us. Not only do I care for the seniors in my community as a part of my job, but I come home each day to do the same. Every day we have to check our emotions, and tongues, to make sure that she (Irene) gets proper attention from us and that we keep our relationships healthy and strong."

Jennifer knows firsthand the emotional toll of caregiving on her family. She explains, "My husband is a very devoted son. His mother's aging and behaviors affect him greatly. I try to be supportive of both of them and mediate their arguments and facilitate difficult conversations that need to be had." Jennifer and her husband share the responsibilities of caregiving – one will make sure she eats while the other

manages medications and so forth. Jeff works from home and will often take Irene to appointments during the day. Jennifer gives Irene small motor tasks, asks her questions to keep her memory intact, and helps with showers. Jennifer explains that it is often difficult to relax at home because Irene dozes during the day and does not sleep at night. This means Irene needs 24-hour care and observation.

When asked about coping with the stress of caregiving, Jennifer remarked, "I am very good at self-care. I have to be, due to my own chronic pain and health issues. I know when I can no longer push myself and it is at that time that I stop what I am doing to take a break – I rest, I read, watch movies and paint my nails. Jennifer states that her husband also recognizes the need to rest and recharge. Both Jennifer and her husband ponder the future, "We are aging. Who will take care of us? What is fair to ask of my own children? What can we do now to prevent aging in a way that keeps us being productive and self-sufficient into our later years?"

Jennifer reflects on the value our society places on older adults, "There is value to raising children in the same home as their grandparents, families working together for the good of everyone and the sacrifices we make every day for the good of others." Jennifer always remains hopeful even when care is difficult and exhausting, both physically and mentally. Jennifer strongly believes, "We just have to focus on the joy in every moment." And, commented, "When someone in our family complains about Irene, I try to remind them, or myself, that it is an honor to have been chosen by God for this task."