

Dancing through Life!

April 2022 Caregiver of the Month, Lisa Langston
Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services



In April 2020 when Lisa received a call that her father, Claude, had a stroke and was in the hospital, she knew she had to go. She dropped everything in Texas where she lived at the time and quickly drove to Kentucky, not knowing what condition she would find her father in. Claude had been battling malignant melanoma for several years, first diagnosed in 2017 and later reoccurring in 2019 for the second time.

Claude was discharged home on hospice care after a short stay in the hospital. It was not Lisa's plan to stay indefinitely when she left Texas, however she knew she was being called to help with her father. Lisa's step-mother, Marilyn, did not have the physical strength to care for Claude. He was paralyzed on his right side and needed physical assistance with all aspects of his daily care.

Lisa took a family medical leave from her job in Texas – a job she loved because she had close relationships with her co-workers. She didn't belabor the decision, but rather immediately decided she was needed to be with her father. "I knew it was the right decision at the time," said Lisa. "My dad was adamant about someone helping his wife through this difficult time." Lisa never questioned the decision to care for her father. She put her life on hold and dedicated herself to this journey no matter where it would go or how long it would take. Lisa explained, "It was a natural role. I'm not sure if it's because I raised four kids, but I just automatically knew what to do."

Lisa's father passed away six weeks later. Lisa stated, "I was blessed. I was able to do what others weren't able to do." Lisa spent time tracking down the necessary paperwork in order to arrange a military funeral – her father's dying wish. Also, she carried out her father's desires as he was especially concerned about his wife. Lisa not only fulfilled the role of her father's caregiver, offering compassion and dignity his last days, but she was able to provide the assistance and support that Marilyn also needed. After final arrangements were made and Lisa's step-mother adjusted, Lisa returned to Texas. She has never looked back with regret.

Lisa has four adult children, Samantha, 34, Karson, 32, Dakota, 24, and Jaylan, 21. She credits her children and grandchildren for giving her the strength to step up in life's difficult situations. "They have helped me so much. I talk to them every day."

In a parallel situation, Lisa's mother, Donna, has had health challenges since she was diagnosed with stage four metastatic lung cancer in 2007. Donna was given a 2% chance of survival as the cancer had metastasized to her brain. Donna received cancer treatments and miraculously recovered for many years. In 2016, Donna moved from Texas to live with her son (Lisa's brother) and his wife, Jason and Cynthia, in Ashland, MO, and in 2019 was diagnosed with a reoccurrence of cancer. They have been a constant source of support for Donna through her illness.

In December 2020, Lisa made a visit to surprise her mom for the holidays. She planned to stay only a few days, however, when Donna's lung biopsy resulted in a collapsed lung, Lisa ended up staying for two and half weeks. As Donna was struggling with recovery from the collapsed lung and issues related to Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), Lisa decided to quit her job in Texas and permanently relocate to Missouri.

Currently, Lisa lives with her mother in a downstairs apartment at her brother's house. She is available at a moment's notice if Donna should need something. Lisa drives and accompanies her mother to all medical appointments and treatments. She tracks and sets up Donna's medications and provides reminders when needed.

Lisa reflects on the time she spent with her father, "I learned things that I would need later in life. I learned things that would help with my mom." Without hesitation, Lisa provides the care and emotional support her mother needs every day during this challenging time.

Because Donna left her long-time home in Kentucky, she does not have friends in Missouri. Not only is Lisa her mother's primary caregiver but a steady source of support and companionship. Donna loves crafts and one of her favorite hobbies is dancing. In fact, prior to her health decline, Donna won a hip-hop dance contest with some seriously courageous moves. Lisa shares the same passion for dancing. With exuberant laughter, Lisa tells of a time when the two of them were at home dancing together. Lisa clearly conveys a symbiotic bond with her mother. It's obvious that Lisa is not only committed to her mother, but having fun while doing it. Lisa and her mother have a lot in common. They both married Army men, raised families as military wives and have traveled the world, living in Hawaii and Germany.

Often, Lisa and her children video chat with Donna. It is their way to stay connected. "Family is everything!" Lisa explained. "Family is all you have sometimes, and you must stick together." Relationships are the key to sustaining Lisa's ability to manage life's difficult circumstances.

While Lisa is providing the support her mother needs, she is also working for her brother, Jason, in his pawn shop business. They are a small operation with just a few employees. Jason has mobility issues and is planning for a hip replacement later this year. Lisa has been learning the business in hopes of stepping in to manage all aspects of the shop while Jason has surgery and takes time off work for his rehabilitation and recovery. This is just another example of Lisa's devotion to her family.

Cancer is a disease that Lisa is all too familiar with. As a cancer survivor herself, Lisa wishes for a cure. She had a bout with breast cancer in 2018 and knows first hand how devastating the disease can be. In 2009, Lisa's half-sister passed away of melanoma.

Lisa has learned many things over the years, but importantly she concluded, "Every moment counts. Treasure every moment and make the most out of each day!" She would also like others to know to take time for self-care, even if it's just an hour or two throughout the week. Lisa is amazed by the cycle of life in which a parent sees a child born and then that child is with their parent until their very last breath. She considers caregiving a badge of honor.

Lisa credits her best friend, Jennifer, for always standing by her side. Having a background as a hospice nurse, Jennifer has been an incredible source of strength and support for Lisa to navigate her journey as a caregiver. "I am forever grateful for her," Lisa remarked.

We should all live with the same passion and vigor that Lisa does: Don't Think, Just Dance! Lisa exemplifies that serving others is a choice and can be done with grace and confidence. And, she has the moves to prove it!