

My Cup Runneth Over!

July 2022 Caregiver of the Month, Tanya Steward
Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services



Tanya is no stranger to caregiving. As the fifth child – and oldest girl – in a line-up of nine children, Tanya was caring for her younger siblings at the age of ten. Born and raised in Little Rock, AK, Tanya remembers learning to prep meals for her mother and then cooking entire meals for the family by the age of 11.

When Tanya’s mother, Dorothy, was diagnosed with Myelodysplastic Syndrome (MDS) in 2008, she stepped right in. Tanya traveled back and forth from St. Louis to Little Rock, staying at intervals to help care for her mother during hospitalizations and rehabilitation. Tanya persuaded Medicare to pay for injections that were denied based on the medical diagnosis. Without these injections, Dorothy’s condition would have deteriorated to the point of becoming become leukemic (abnormal cell growth). Tanya also located a clinical study in St. Louis that provided options for her mother’s treatment. In 2011, Dorothy had open heart surgery. Without hesitating, Tanya stood by her mother’s side providing care as she went through recovery, rehabilitation, and home care.

In 2014, Tanya moved her mother into her home after she was diagnosed with Stage 4 Ovarian Cancer requiring chemotherapy treatments. Not long after her mother moved in, Tanya’s husband, Alfred (Al), fell off a ladder breaking his hip which required surgery. Alfred was denied in-home care and physical therapy which would have expedited his recovery. As Tanya was juggling tasks to provide the best possible care to both her mother and husband, she unfortunately lost her job as an IT project manager due the demands on her time. And, while Alfred recovered fully from his hip replacement, Tanya started noticing a decline in his cognitive abilities, including memory. Tanya faithfully cared for her mother until her death in 2016.

Also in 2016, Tanya’s loving spouse Al, a Vietnam War Veteran and businessman, was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s Disease. Without hesitation, Tanya moved right into the role of caregiver and advocate for Al without a break. It became Tanya’s priority to help Al live as independently as possible with the

necessary accommodations and prompting. For safety, Tanya installed alarms to the home's exits as well as cameras for supervision.

Tanya has creatively found ways to engage Al in his daily life. They would work memory puzzles and games, look at family photos to identify familiar faces and events, and dial-in on monthly Zoom calls with children, siblings, and other relatives. Tanya has made every effort to honor the many facets of Al – a father, businessman, trustee at his Church, investor, real estate broker, tax consultant, and retired manager from the Farmers Home Administration. To manage his many obligations, Al often worked from the crack of dawn until late in the evening. So, he felt a bit lost when he was no longer able to perform tasks that seemed so routine before.

Hence, Tanya remained certain to keep Al productive by modifying existing lawn equipment and purchasing new items with safety and protective features, such as a battery powered Greenworks lawnmower, so he could continue mowing the lawn. After having two surgeries herself, Tanya would sit on the front porch or watch Al from inside the house through cameras to make sure he remained safe. When Al became distracted, Tanya redirected him to the next thought and related task. Tanya has continually looked for ways to overcome her husband's limitations so that he can maintain a sense of independence and experience the best quality of life. When Al was no longer able to drive safely, Tanya liquidated his vehicles and established a fund that would eventually be used to pay for in-home services.

Al has become introverted and despondent. But it does not keep Tanya from engaging in conversations with him, watching a show or movie, or comforting him when he needs reassurance. At times, Al can be likened to a toddler, asking why questions and often gives puzzled looks. Tanya provides Al with the physical care he needs, such as assistance with bathing, dressing, and meal preparation. Maintaining peace in the home has become Tanya's priority as she has watched Al diminish in many of his functional abilities. Tanya hired other caregivers although she continues providing Al's care during the overnight hours (he is usually awake) and on the weekends.

Remarkably, Tanya went back to work last year full-time as a contracted Project Manager. She not only has a passion for helping her family but the community at large. Tanya was featured in the local newspaper in St Louis for purchasing over 200 pairs of children's shoes from a shoe store going out of business and convincing the owner to donate another 100 pairs – all of which were donated to Central Baptist Church's community outreach program. In addition, she called up family members to get their shoe sizes. Tanya's sister, Maria, and nominator for this caregiver award wrote, "If we could walk a mile in her shoes, we would see love and kindness, thoughtfulness, generosity, compassion, authenticity, encouragement, life lessons, and so many teachable moments. She holds everything together."

Tanya refers to herself as the "energizer bunny." Tanya sister, Maria, explains that Tanya "shows so much compassion for others, she keeps going, and going, and going. Her spiritual cup is always full, and God seems to make it overflow. And, it is the excess which she shares with others." Also Maria remarks that Tanya is struggling to give up responsibilities to hired caregivers, who encourage her to take time off for herself. Maria maintains "Tanya is an outstanding caregiver as she focuses on what Al can do instead of what he cannot do. She has patience, endurance, and commitment. Now, she prays for tolerance. She maintains a positive attitude although many frustrating moments arise daily. She can see through these challenges and find the bright side of any situation."

Tanya encourages caregivers to find some time each and every day for self-care. She has worked to build a strong support system and relies on her sister, Maria, best friend, Norma, a gang of Card Group (now Zoom) buddies, and several other family members and friends to help her laugh and focus on things outside of her caregiver role. Also, Tanya particularly appreciates both her children (Lauren and Michael) for their love, emotional and financial support. Michael lives in the St. Louis area and visits every weekend and sometimes during the week to provide handyman assistance. On occasion, Michael provides backup support when Tanya has critical appointments and caregivers aren't available.

Tanya wishes she would have paid more attention to resources and ways to care for herself along the way instead of waiting until she was overwhelmed. She stresses the importance of not taking anything personal and warns, "If they don't recognize you or express any emotion toward you, it's not them, it's the illness."