



SHUTTERSTOCK/JENNY STORM

The Gift of Six Days

BY LAURIE EINSTEIN KOSZUTA, BSN, RN

It was 0600 in early July 2021 when my phone jolted me awake. I had spent a restless night worrying about my 97-year-old mother after receiving a call earlier that day from her assisted living facility notifying me that she had tested positive for COVID-19. As a daughter, I found the news to be brutal because it meant a 2-week lockdown. As a nurse, I was alarmed because my mother was an older adult and immunocompromised with chronic lymphocytic leukemia. Further, my 95-year-old father had just passed away 2 weeks before.

"Hello," I said hurriedly. The caller ID revealed the number of the assisted living facility. Had something happened to my mother overnight?

"This is Cindy*," the person on the line said. Cindy was a nurse at the assisted living facility. "I don't

know what to do," she said, her voice uneasy.

"What's wrong, Cindy?"

"Can you come in and care for your mother?" she asked haltingly.

"What?" I asked in shocked disbelief.

"I don't know what to do," she repeated. "I am the only nurse here with one certified nursing assistant to care for 35 residents, five of whom have COVID-19."

"But I don't work there," I responded with apprehension. I knew that the staff was aware of my background as an RN, but the request was very unusual. "Did you call administration?"

Cindy detailed her conversation with the temporary administrator, who had only been in the position for a few days. She was told to do her best; no

other staffing was available. The advice was horrifying, so she considered calling me to be the only solution.

The COVID-19 pandemic dealt a significant blow to the facility, resulting in a mass exodus of nursing, housekeeping, and administrative staff. Even before the pandemic, residents' families were told that hiring nurses, even from staffing agencies, had become nearly impossible.

By Cindy's tone, I could tell she was practically begging. My initial reaction to her request was apprehension. It had been years since I had worked in a clinical setting. However, saying no meant not seeing my mother for 2 weeks. I knew there was only one possible answer.

"I'll be there," I assured her.

Twenty minutes later, I entered the facility. No one was at the front desk,

so I took my temperature and donned personal protective equipment before ringing the bell to access the locked resident wing.

Cindy opened the door and then briefed me on my mother's condition. I entered my mother's room and found red isolation bags, gowns, gloves, and an oxygen concentrator. I looked at my mother as she slept in bed. She was no longer just my mother; she was my patient. The only thing I was not going to do was dispense medications. At that moment, all my clinical nursing skills came flooding back as if I had never left hospital nursing.

I began my physical assessment. When my mother woke up, she spoke in fragmented sentences as I assisted her to the bathroom. For the

next 6 days, I was her private duty nurse late into each evening, regularly updating the nurse on duty. No one ever asked me to leave, although no other residents' families were allowed in. Being in isolation with her gave me time to think about why I had become a nurse. Was it to prepare me to care for my mother during the worst time of her life?

By the seventh day, her condition had deteriorated and she required hospitalization. There was nothing more I could do.

Visitors were not allowed at the hospital, so the nurses called me with updates on her condition. She tested negative on the fourth day of hospitalization and was transferred to a private room, which allowed visitors. When I came to visit, I had

hoped to find her alert and oriented as she had been just a few weeks ago. Unfortunately, she was disoriented and cried hysterically. I stayed with her every day to try to keep her calm. However, it did not work. Nothing did. Two weeks later, my mother passed away in the hospital.

Within a month, I lost both my parents. Despite the loss, I feel grateful that I had the chance to take care of my mother for 6 days at the facility. My nursing skills were a gift that gave me precious time we might never have had otherwise. ■

*The nurse's name was changed to protect privacy.

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