

What I have learned on the way to becoming a “Healthcare Hero”

by Deborah Selsavage, PAC Certified Independent Trainer

Even before I had the opportunity to study under Teepa Snow, I had become an advocate for person-centered compassionate care. I saw it work with my husband who died from dementia in 2010. After a series of difficult experiences that including his being kicked out of several communities, I found a couple who ran a six bed memory care facility who practiced compassionate care based on an abiding belief that love and respect was the basis for proper care, regardless of how challenging the person living with dementia might be.

After Albert’s death, I became a licensed assisted living facility administrator, but eventually decided I could do more good by creating my own company to promote and train in techniques of compassionate care. So, in 2014 I formed Coping with Dementia LLC, earned my PAC Trainer certification, and become a Certified Dementia Practitioner.

Filled with optimism about the promise of my new venture, I hit the street, delivering a proposal for training to several assisted living communities and home healthcare companies in Citrus County. Then I waited for the phone to ring. It did not take me long to learn that my idea of starting at the top to revolutionize an industry was not realistic.

In the meantime, I joined the Board of Directors of the Alzheimer’s Family Organization, of which I had been a member for seven years. It is a non-profit that serves eight west-central Florida counties, and I began to facilitate caregiver support groups for the AFO as a volunteer. Here I found home caregivers who had a keen desire for knowledge about resources and techniques of care that could make life better for both the caregiver and the person living with dementia. I also heard their message that they were sometimes misunderstood and not treated with respect within the community.

Applying PAC principles, my life and business partner, Ed Youngblood, and I created a curriculum aimed specifically at family caregivers. Entitled ABC of Dementia, it is a two-hour workshop that we deliver *pro bono* everywhere and any time the opportunity arises. We have presented this workshop to audiences as small as five and as large as 100-plus.

We also created a course entitled Dementia Friendly Business Training and Certification that we offer to businesses for a fee. In addition, I began to write a monthly column to the Citrus County Chronicle.

Lately, these programs have really taken off. To date, we have certified 25 businesses and 10 churches in Citrus County as Dementia Friendly, and so far, in the first six months of 2017, more than 700 family caregivers have gone through our ABC of Dementia training.



Recently, it was my honor to be named a 2017 Healthcare Hero in the category of Community Outreach by the Citrus County Chamber of Commerce and the Citrus County Chronicle. While this is certainly a great honor, I try not to look at it as a symbol of success. Rather, I see it as validation that I am on the right path to use my PAC training to deliver care and resource knowledge to family caregivers.

Ironically, professional care institutions have begun to approach my company to provide training. Maybe what I have learned is that to make an impact at the top of a profession, we must do our work first at the grass roots level.

But even if professional training takes off for my company, I will never let it displace my work with families who are excited about becoming better caregivers. Working with family caregivers, many of whom will never be able to afford professional care, is where I find the real joy and satisfaction of teaching the Positive Approach to Care.

I thank Citrus County for this honor, and I will continue to work to improve the quality of life for individuals with dementia and their caregivers with the skills I have been trained in. I will always try to live up to the motto of my company, which is, "We all deserve the best."

Debbie Selsavage is a Certified Dementia Practitioner and trainer in The Positive Approach to Care, a licensed assisted living administrator, President of the Alzheimer's Family Organization, and President of Coping with Dementia LLC, an organization dedicated to making life better for those with dementia and their caregivers. [Contact Deborah](#) for more information!